Hi hopeful graduate student!

In the 2008-09 academic year, I applied to 14 clinical psychology Ph.D. programs across the country. Most of this information best applies to clinical and counseling Ph.D. programs, but a lot of it applies to Psy.D. and other Ph.D. programs as well.

Here's a bit about me: I'm a huge procrastinator, I am convinced I am doing things wrong most of the time, and I had to over-night and express mail over half of my applications. As I went through the application and interview process, I got smarter about it, and by now I feel compelled to pass on my acquired wisdom so that this process will hopefully be a little easier for others. I interviewed with 10 schools (3 phone/7 in person), was offered admission at 7, and eventually ended up at the University of Minnesota.

This binder is just a primer and a collection of the most important tips I wish I had at the beginning of this whole thing. I've included handouts and helpful sources I've found along the way as well as some tips I've written. It's by no means comprehensive, and I'm hoping people add additional materials as they go through this grueling process.

Very generally:
    Getting in to grad school takes a remarkable amount of time.
     Each of these steps can be expensive
    You'll likely questions why the hell you're bothering with this

However, now that I'm on the other end of it, I'm looking back on it warmly. Ok, not really, but I'm really happy I did it. Hopefully this will save you some stress and time while applying! While it's a lot of time and effort, it's worth it. Good luck!

Mary Petrosko
Class of 2009
petrmary@dom.edu

Graduate School Timeline

Freshman-sophomore year

It is never too early to begin narrowing down your interests and starting to plan for the future. This is the time to explore areas of interest through coursework, volunteer experience, experiential learning opportunities, job shadowing, and interviewing professionals. You will want to focus on achieving and maintaining a strong GPA, building relationships with faculty and your advisor(s), adding to your resume, and identifying interest areas.

Junior year fall semester

This is the time to begin (if you haven't already) really establishing yourself in your major. Take advantage of as many applicable opportunities as you can: Directed Research, Supervised Field Placement, Undergraduate Teaching Assistant, Psi Chi, and Panther Psychology.

Identify possible faculty members for letters of recommendation. Possibilities could include professors, research supervisors, and/or faculty organization advisors. Some students have a hard time identifying three faculty members in psychology, and now is the time to try to foster these relationships. Try taking a professor for more than one class, take smaller sections of courses, get involved in a research lab, etc.

Junior year spring semester

In addition to continuing to build a strong resume filled with experience and a strong GPA, you should start thinking about the GRE exam(s). Students interested in applying to graduate school are more often than not required to take the GRE General Exam. In addition to the general exam, some students are also required to take the GRE Psychology Subject Exam. You should plan ahead for these exams so that you have time to gather resources, choose testing date(s), and STUDY!! Studying for these exams should not be taken lightly, and it is challenging to get into the mindset of standardized tests and master the content of the exam(s).

In addition to studying for the GRE exam(s), you should begin to search for possible graduate schools in your area of interest. The process of choosing possible programs can seem challenging, but if you are prepared and organized it will be worth the work. Unfortunately, there is no one resource that will answer all your questions or provide you with all the information you will need to make an informed decision. However, using a websites, books/publications, professors, and advisors you will become organized and knowledgeable about this process.

Websites:
Once you have narrowed down what types of programs you are looking for, there are a number of resources that are available.
- APA website: www.apa.org
- ACA website www.counseling.org
- Grad school listings: www.gradschools.com
- CACREP (Counsel for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs):

www.cacrep.org
    • Council on Social Work Education: httpJ/www.cswe.org/CSWE/

Also, check out professional organizations in your area of interest. Helpful links are listed on the career handouts in the Advising Office.

<u>Publications:</u>

After choosing at least a dozen of possible schools, you will need to evaluate some important factors including: program size, faculty research, geographic location, financial assistance, teaching/research assistantships, fit of program to your needs and interests. As you are evaluating the programs, you should also research what the schools deem important in the application process. The Graduate Study in Psychology published annually by APA is available in the Advising Office and Hillman Library is a great resource, because it rates the following factors for each program on a low, medium, high rating scale: GRE scores, GPA, Research experience, Volunteer/service learning experience, work experience, extracurricular activities, interview, personal statement, and letters of recommendation. This book also includes helpful information about financial assistance, research/teaching assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships. The Advising Office also has various other publications to help with your graduate school search process.

Senior year fall semester

You should have either taken the GRE exam(s), or are planning to take the exam this semester. You should have your desired scores by mid-November of this term (assuming you want to begin graduate school directly after you finish your undergraduate degree). You want to make sure that you have scores you are satisfied with by this time because application deadlines will begin December 1ˢ and continue on through February. Some schools won't accept late test scores, and you don't want all of your hard work to be wasted on poor planning.

Thank recommenders for their assistance and support. This is one step that some students overlook amidst the application process. Recommenders are helping you by writing these recommendations and the least you can do is to acknowledge their support.

It would be helpful for you to create a listing, or chart, of the schools you have applied to, application deadlines, anticipated acceptance dates, and other important facts (types of financial assistance, research/teaching assistantships, etc) that will factor into your final decision. This will help you to consider all factors when making decisions between schools.

Application deadlines begin December 1, so you will be busy filling out applications, writing your personal statements, and obtaining letters of recommendation. Some students try to take a smaller course load this term in order to allot the extra time this application process demands.

Senior year spring semester
If you have planned properly, this semester will be making decisions and evaluating offers. Now is the time to review your organized list of possible graduate schools to prepare for acceptance letters. Evaluating your offers can be tough, so make sure to enlist help (family,

faculty, research supervisors, and your recommenders).

File FAFSA form to apply for financial aid. This form is due by March 1$^{s`}$, and if you plan on attending grad school after you graduate from undergrad, you will need to have submitted this form.

Lastly, because applying to graduate programs is a process, make sure to use the resources available and enlist the help of advisors, professors, and other students to help you!

Undergraduate Research: Getting Involved and Getting Into Graduate School: A Students Perspective

by Scott F. Grover - Point Loma Nazarene University

Undergraduate research can make the difference between admission or rejection to graduate school. In fact, many graduate schools are starting to require research experience. Recent research on admissions to APA accredited doctoral programs has shown that research experience and commitment to research were the most important factors in the admissions decision (Munoz-Dunbar & Stanton, 1999). Also, nearly 75% of PhD programs in psychology require experimental methods and research design courses (Mayne, Norcross, & Sayette, 1994). Nearly all of the programs require conceptual statistical knowledge and expect students to know how to be able to apply such knowledge. So where can one gain such experience and technical knowledge?

Research provides a good opportunity to gain experience and develop important skills. Research regarding admissions to PhD programs in experimental, clinical, counseling, and school psychology found that field placements and internship experiences are not as important as GPA, GRE scores, letters of recommendation, and research experience (Landrum, Jeglum, & Cashin, 1994; Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989). The message is clear that a scholarly research project can set apart a serious candidate for graduate school. Research experience can give an applicant an advantage and the skills needed to not only get into graduate school but to succeed in graduate school. Graduate schools are starting to make it clear that it is not enough to have textbook knowledge of research methods and design; they require hands-on practical research experience. In fact, when applying to several graduate schools found that some of them actually require applicants to have had some form of research experience for their application to be considered.

I was motivated to do research primarily because I was told it looked good to graduate schools. I was surprised to find that I not only enjoyed the work but was also reaping the rewards of my hard work for months to come. My involvement in research began by becoming educated on the research being conducted by one of my professors and simply expressing interest to that professor. Psychology professors often need bright motivated students to help conduct research projects. Ask around to find out if a professor is looking for a research assistant; you can usually receive academic credit for assisting with research. Research projects are an opportunity to learn valuable statistical skills that are highly desirable in the workplace. Many organizations in the community often will hire students to conduct research or statistical analyses.

Gain Experience in the Field

It is important for students to know what they intend to study when applying for graduate school. Graduate schools will ask applicants to explain in their statement of purpose what kind of work they are interested in. Some students find they enjoy designing

and conducting a research project, while others prefer working with people in a clinical capacity. Research experience can be helpful in determining whether to pursue research or clinical work in graduate school. This can be very important because most graduate schools tend to be oriented towards either research or clinical work. Research provides a good opportunity to figure out what research interests one has and in what field. Also, most applications ask which professors you might want to work with; knowing your own research interests is crucial to matching yourself to a faculty member.

Student research has several advantages that are worth mentioning. Student research is more accessible and typically consists of smaller, quicker projects. These projects can help build a strong vita with numerous conference presentations and publications. However, student research has several shortcomings which include a general lack of funding and lack of technical experience on the researcher's part such as research design or statistical errors.

Get a Mentor

Faculty-led research may make up for many of the shortcomings of student research. There is a marked difference in the quality of research when the research is done collaboratively with a professor that has experience, funding, and contacts. A research project's scope will generally increase in terms of resources, length, and overall quality when undertaken with a professor in a student's department. For example, the research that I was involved in was financed by a grant from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).

Recent research has shown the merits of getting involved in a professor's research project. A study done looking at the student/ professor mentor relationship (Koch, 2002) reported, "students who were mentored were subsequently more productive in terms of scholarly output (e.g. conference presentations, publications). Those who were mentored also felt better prepared for either their current work position or graduate school" (p. 36).

Present or Publish Research

Research gives the student an opportunity to show graduate schools a student's specific research interests and scholarly potential through presentations and publications. Research with a professor often can lead to a conference presentation or a journal publication. A very good way to increase one's chances of admission to graduate school is publishing an article or empirical paper. There are many undergraduate journals that will publish student research, are relatively easy to find, and are worth pursuing. It may be too ambitious as an undergraduate to try to publish in an APA journal. It does take time to prepare a manuscript for publication, but it would be great practice for eventually writing a dissertation or other scholarly work. Graduate schools look highly upon research experience and publication/conference presentations because they are believed to be reliable predictors of future success in graduate school. Graduate schools look for these things: a student who has a high level of motivation, interest in the field, and scholarly potential. Research experience and publication or conference presentations are used often as subjective measures of choosing a candidate for graduate school and are given a good deal of weight along with objective measures such as GPA and GRE scores. A published study asked graduate institutions about their procedures for selecting applicants and they responded by

placing heavy emphases on research experience (Landrum et. al., 2004).

Be Proactive

Research is an opportunity to be visible in a student's department. Being active in their department is one thing that students can easily do to increase their chances of graduate school admission. Research experience and being active in the department can have financial advantages as well. As a result of my research experience and activity in the psychology department at Point Loma Nazarene University, I received a large scholarship from the psychology department. Graduate schools also look for students at the top of the department as evidenced by departmental scholarships and conference presentations (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000).

An often overlooked advantage of research is getting the opportunity to know a professor on a personal level outside of the classroom. As a result, the professor is often more willing to write a favorable letter of recommendation. Letters of recommendation are given a lot of weight in most graduate school admission processes. Strong letters of recommendation can often make up for other areas of weakness (Keith-Spiegel, 1991).

Network, Network, Network

Collaborative research can allow a student to attend a conference and meet and network with professionals in the field of psychology. Many colleges and universities will have a budget for students to attend conferences and present their research. As a student, take advantage of this opportunity to present research.

Research can facilitate networking and meeting researchers and professors from graduate schools you might be interested in. Conferences can provide an opportunity to link up with graduate school professors that have the same and similar interests as you. For example, the research that I was involved in allowed me to meet and work with a professor from a graduate institution that I was interested in attending. I made a connection with a professor who shared research interests with me, and he offered to make a favorable comment to the admissions committee on my behalf.

Research experience and networking can prove to be a valuable asset when it comes time to apply for graduate school. The opportunity to talk with professors at conferences and see what their research interests are can be advantageous for determining not only a career path but also to determine the right graduate school program for you. For example, you may meet an expert neurocognitive scientist who is doing brain research with a functional MRI machine at Arizona State University. This would be important to know when choosing where to apply if you're interested in neurobiological research. Another example is when a research project allowed me to meet with professors and researchers from various universities around the country. Through this experience I got an idea of what their graduate programs emphasized and learned of their projects and interests. This information was very helpful when choosing which schools to apply to and was helpful with the application process itself. These conversations can also be helpful when writing your personal statement and mentioning the professors' names and their ongoing research projects. These kinds of details make a difference and show admissions committees that you are serious about graduate study.

These interactions can also be helpful in getting information about the topics of research, which professors are involved in research, who is competing for grants, who has received grants, and who would have money to hire you as a research assistant. Networking can payoff and if I am hired, I would receive a research assistantship and half tuition scholarship. Knowing professors projects and funding for projects are important things to

consider when choosing a graduate school. For example, I have been networking with a professor through my research who is in the process of receiving a million dollar grant and is interested in hiring me as a research assistant; if it works out, I would receive a large stipend. Research experience can equip a student with the technical skills and the experience to not only get into a quality graduate program but to succeed in it. Research experience often can provide many ways for students to distinguish themselves and increase their chances of admission to graduate school.

Research can also broaden students' perspectives and open the door for various professional opportunities. Research experience is by far one of the most worthwhile ventures that undergraduates can undertake to further their professional and personal goals of continuing graduate education.

Four things to do to increase one's chances of graduate school admission:

1. **Get involved in research**
2. **Network with professionals in the field**
3. **Attend conferences**
4. **Present a poster or paper at a conference**

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Scott F. Grover graduated from Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego with a degree in therapeutic and community psychology in 2005. Mr. Grover is currently working with at-risk youth as a behavioral specialist with Mental Health Systems Inc. Mr. Grover will also be attending Fuller Theological Seminary to pursue a PhD in clinical psychology in the fall. His goals include gaining experience doing clinical assessment and conducting research on the effectiveness of various therapeutic interventions.

One important part of his undergraduate career began in his junior year when he became involved in research with Dr. Brad Strawn, specifically investigating virtues and values set in a cultural context. This research culminated in the presentation of the project at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association and at the Association of Moral Education at Harvard University.

One of Mr. Grover's many interests include playing tennis and running. He also has a passion for nature and the outdoors because he used to be a forest ranger. Mr. Grover is active in the psychology department and plays tennis regularly with faculty members at PLNU.

GRE

- My biggest tip: take the GRE early! During the summer before you apply is the best time. Really. It sucks to be studying for it during the semester.
- While you can take it as many times as you want, you can only take it once every calendar month.
- Check the registration deadline for the Psychology subject GRE. Unlike the general test, this is only offered a few times a year. If you miss the cutoff you just have to hope to get in on standby.
- Your scores will be used as a cutoff for consideration to some programs, so be sure to prepare before test day. That said, you'll never feel fully prepared, so just schedule it in a reasonable amount of time to give yourself a concrete test day to work toward.
  - o All scores you've ever gotten on the test are reported to schools you apply to, but they usually consider your highest score only

Resources:

Download the practice GRE tests off the ETS website. (ETS GRE homepage—*test takers—practice for a GRE test
  - o *GRE Power prep* is the most similar to the actual test (Kaplan and Princeton Review practice tests are harder than the actual test, so don't get discouraged with those. They're good practice for timing and difficult questions, but can crush morale pretty well also)

MyDU—Resources— Career Development—*Learning Express
  - o Here's a bunch of practice tests. You have to create a login ID (which is free)
Huge nerd tip: search on facebook for GRE — there are groups that put together websites that offer free (sometimes pirated) prep materials which are GREAT. When I wrote this, these were good:
  - o http://www.rnajortests.com/gre/
  - o http ://graduatestudiesinusa.blogspot.com/2008/05/free-gre-downloads.html
    - ■ There are vocab applications that save you time making notecards. The format's great for practicing while watching TV or something

Even though there's a ton of free stuff (really, the internet's great), I'd recommend buying *Kaplan* and/or *Princeton Review* practice books. You haven't done most of this stuff since 9th grade, and, while it's embarrassing to admit, you have no idea how to do it anymore. They explain it simply and give you the tricks to do it quickly.

GRE General Exam Information

WHY TAKE IT?   Most graduate schools require it

HOW LONG IS IT? 2 1/2 hours

HOW TO REGISTER?   www.gre.org

HOW IS IT SCORED?
>   Scoring is based on your:
> - Verbal Score (200 to 800 points)
> - Math Score (200 to 800 points)
> - Analytical Writing Assessment (0 to 6 points)

WHEN ARE THE   Computer-based General Test: you can view your unofficial verbal and
SCORES REPORTED?   quantitative scores at the test center; however, because of the
essay scoring process, you will not be able to view your analytical
writing scores at that time. Verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing
scores on the computer-based General Test will be sent to you and the
institutions you designate within 10 to 15 days of your test
administration.

VERBAL   • 30 multiple-choice questions

• 30 minute section
The skills measured include the test taker's ability to analyze and
evaluate written material and synthesize information obtained
from it, analyze relationships among component parts of
sentences, and recognize relationships between words and
concepts.

QUANTITATIVE   • 28 multiple-choice questions

• 45 minute section
The skills measured include the test taker's ability to
understand basic concepts of arithmetic, algebra, geometry,
and data analysis, reason quantitatively, and solve problems in
a quantitative setting.

ANALYTICAL WRITING   • 2 essays

- 30 minutes for one essay and 45 minutes for the other
The skills measured include the test takers ability to articulate
complex ideas clearly and effectively, examine claims and

accompanying evidence, support ideas with relevant reasons and examples, sustain a well-focused, coherent discussion, and control the elements of standard written English. The analytical writing section consists of two analytical writing tasks: a 45-minute "Present Your Perspective on an Issue" task and a 30-minute "Analyze an Argument" task. The "Issue" task states an opinion on an issue of general interest and asks you to address the issue from any perspective(s) you wish, as long as you provide relevant reasons and examples to explain and support your views. The "Argument" task requires you to critique an argument by discussing how well-reasoned you find it. You are asked to consider the logical soundness of the argument rather than to agree or disagree with the position it presents. The "Issue and Argument" are complementary in that the "issue" requires you to construct a personal argument about an issue, and the "Argument" requires you to critique someone else's argument by assessing its claims.

This information has been adapted from

www.princetonreview.com and www.ets.org

GRE General Exam Information

Quick facts

-You can only take the GRE general exam once per calendar month.

-You should register at least a month in advance.

-Scores could take at least four weeks to arrive at designated institutions. Make sure to allow enough time for institutions to receive your scores by the application deadlines.

-During your testing, you can choose to send your scores to up to 4 institutions without paying additional fees. If you choose to send your scores to more than 4 schools, you will have to contact ETS (Educational Testing Service www.ets.org) to request additional reports. Each additional score report costs $15.

-GRE scores are reported for up to five years.

FAQS

Where can I sign up for the exam?

You can sign up online at www.gre.org or visit this site for information about phone, fax, and mail registration.

Where can I take the test?

You can take the both the general and subject exam at a number of sites, including The Office of Measurement and Evaluation of Teaching located in G35 of the Cathedral of Learning is an official testing site. You can choose this site (code 7705) when registering for the exam, or choose a more convenient site when registering.

How much does the GRE exam cost?

The general and subject exams cost $130 in the U.S.

I've heard there are waivers for the cost of the exam. Is this true?

Yes, fee waivers are available for the cost of the exam to those who qualify. **Note: Fee waivers are not offered for online registration. To learn more, visit:

http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.1488512ecfd5b8849a77b13bc3921509/?vgnextoid=e3f42d3631 df4010VgnVC Ml 0000022f95190 RCRD&vgnextchanneI=398af3d79228501 OVgnVCM 10000022f9519ORCRD

Can I cancel my scores?

Yes, but this option is only available before you view your scores. Canceling your scores will be recorded on your GRE record.

How can I prepare for the General Test?

There are many materials available including private tutoring, courses (classroom and online), books, software, and online materials. These materials can range from $0-$4,000. Although some students opt for private tutoring and enrolling in courses, there are just as many students who prepare with books and free online materials.

When you register for the exam, you will receive a CD-ROM containing test prep

materials. You can also access the following free resources:

GRE POWERPREP software and other online practice materials:

http:/Iwww. ets. org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.1488512ecfd5b8849a77b13bc3921509/?vg nextoid=302b66f22c6a5010VgnV CM 1 0000022f95 1 9ORCRD&vgnextchannel=d687e3b5f64f401 OVgnVCM 10000022f9519ORCRD

GRE Issue topics pool:

http://www.ets. org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.1488512ecfd5b8849a77b13bc3921509/?vg nextoid=b63ce7b9edfb501 OVg nV CM 10000022f9519ORCRD&vgnextchannel=06c7e3b5f64f4010VgnVCM 10000022f9519ORCRD

GRE Essay topics pool:

http:/%www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.1488512ecfd5b8849a77b 13bc3921509/?vgnextoid=ef752d3631 df401 OVgnVC Ml 0000022f951 90RCRD&vnextchannel=06c7e3b5f64t401 OVgnVCM 10000022f9519ORCRD

Free online Kaplan GRE services

http://www.kaptest.com/Kaplan/Article/Graduate/GRE/Practice-for-the-GRE/GR aboutgre practiceGRE.html

Choosing Schools: Clinical and Counseling Psychology

Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology
By: John C. Norcross, Michael A. Sayette, and Tracy J. Mayne.

I cannot say enough about this book. Get this book as soon possible. It gives timelines, worksheets, tips, info on most programs, everything. What I'm writing in this binder is m: subjective experience, and while I think it's good, this book gives WAY more comprehensive and detailed information about the process.

Insider's Guide gives program information you can't find anywhere else. They list a ton of info, but I found the most helpful to be: GRE mean of incoming students, GPA mean, number of applications/admissions, % of students receiving financial assistance, and specific research areas.

You'd think I'm being paid to endorse this or something. Actually I *am* this excited about this book. Almost every applicant I met at each interview swears by it. The ones that didn't know about it couldn't believe there was such a thing, and they definitely felt like they missed out.

Here's what I'd recommend:

1. *Insider's Guide* has an index in the back that sorts schools by research and clinical areas. Make a list of the programs that have research/clinical interests that match yours
2. Look through each program's report in *Insider 's Guide* and cross off schools according to whatever limitations you have (location, money, GRE/GPA cutoffs)
3. Look up remaining programs' websites — look at the faculty members' research interests and publications
4. Identify 1 or 2 potential mentors at the most interesting programs. Email them to ask if they are accepting students in the coming school year and if they will send you some papers that represent their current research.

   • Some will tell you they are not accepting students and you'll think, `that sucks, but at least I'll save on application costs.' The thing is, sometimes those faculty members change their mind later and decide to take a student. So, if you're super pumped about a mentor's research and can afford the application costs, just apply anyway. These initial answers aren't definitive and they may be impressed by a particular application.

   • Try not to email more than 1 or 2 people in each program. Apparently this is a faux pas. (Whoops)

Getting In: Finding Your Fit in a Graduate Program

Shana McCormick is completing her first year in the school psychology graduate program at Bowling Green State University. Her goals and experiences are unique, but she used a common process to select and gain acceptance to a graduate program in psychology. When choosing an undergraduate university, she felt visiting the campus was the most important criteria. Yet picking a graduate program required much more input.

As an undergraduate at Miami University, Shana knew that she enjoyed studying psychology and wanted to continue beyond the undergraduate level. After tutoring and working with children, she gravitated toward school psychology. Initial brainstorming sessions, web searches, and conversations with peers produced a list of prominent and ideal schools, including her undergraduate institution. She formed a list of criteria that included program accreditation status, faculty-student ratios, and potential advisors. Detailed reading of each program's website allowed Shana to rank each program by its fit with her preferences. She began to narrow her choices after further discussion with her advisor and peers. After sending out applications, she received multiple offers. Ultimately, advice from faculty mentors and peers (i.e., other psychologists) was the most valuable tool in making her final selection.

The process and criteria that Shana used in making her decision are similar to those used by other psychology students who plan to continue on to graduate school. The relative importance of each factor, however, will be different for students with different goals (e.g., professional practice vs. research).

Moreover, students might:

1) First, use a set of initial, general criteria to identify programs that are potentially acceptable.

2) Then, use another primary set of criteria to screen out some programs that do not fit one's preferences.

3) Finally, use a third set of criteria to rank programs.

There is some available evidence that graduate applicants use different sets of criteria for applying to programs than they use for choosing which program offers to accept. Walfish, Stenmark, Shealy, and Shealy (1989) reported findings from a survey of first-year clinical doctoral students. In that study, program prestige, emphasis on supervision, and emotional climate were ranked highest in making a final choice. Many other key criteria were ranked lower in importance, such as the geographic location of a program, financial aid packages, and the presence of a specific mentor. One explanation for this difference is that students

might have sent applications only to programs that satisfied their primary criteria and used the other factors to decide among each offer.

Finding a fit that works for both you and the program will boost the chances of acceptance. Unsuccessful applications or mismatched choices are most likely to occur when students use only a small set of factors, such as focusing on one geographical area, to decide where to apply and which offer to accept. Based on Walfish et al's (1989) findings and our own experience in mentoring undergraduate students who have applied to graduate school in psychology, we have identified (a) the most important factors for selecting graduate programs, and (b) the process of decision-making that is commonly used by prospective graduate students and recommended by advisors of undergraduates. The criteria and decision process have been, integrated into the following strategic plan for students who are considering graduate study in psychology. We have grouped the various criteria used in choosing programs into primary and secondary factors and have presented them in Table 1.

Identifying Programs That Potentially Fit

1. Start by considering your preferences and capabilities.

  -- Identify your goals, noting that specific goals (like working with special populations or focusing only on doctoral programs) can be limiting. Halpern (2002) offered questions that should be considered for students who are interested in
  clinical psychology.

  -- Seek hands-on experiences that closely match the kind of work you might do once your training is complete (e.g., volunteer at a crisis center or conduct independent study with faculty).

  -- Compare your record and experience to other graduate applicants. Read Keith-Spiegel, "Eibachnick, and Spiegel's (1994) article "When Demand Exceeds Supply" to see the criteria that programs use to select students, If you lack field or research experience, consider postponing your applications for a year to establish that experience. If your GPA is a concern, read the chapter "What If My Grades Aren't So Hot" in Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000).

2. Seek advice and information.

  — Talk with professionals who are successful in your field of interest. Ask for their advice on the steps it took to get there.

3. Pause and take stock of your findings.

  -- Consider the fields of study that were recommended by your advisors after hearing your goals.

4. Ask yourself if you are competitive for these types of programs and then, survey schools at the American Psychological Association's (APA) website www.a.pa.org/gradstudyl (pay service) or through each program's own website that are grouped by geography and topic on GradSchools.com's website www.gradschools.coml (free).

— Research many departments that offer program subjects that interest you (e.g., clinical and social) and take notes on each.

Try to avoid limiting yourself to one geographical region. Students may need to restrict their search to specific geographical regions for compelling reasons such as finances and personal circumstances (e.g., a partner's job). Generally, however, applying to more places in more geographic areas maximizes your chances of getting accepted. In some cases, doctoral students receive financial support from their programs which could eliminate the need to live at home.

— Consider the nature of potential programs. PhD programs tend to he more specialized, and a prospective student with specific interests might need to look far and wide to find a program with fac-

ulty who share that interest. Other degree programs (e.g., MSW, MA in counseling, PsyD) offer fairly standard training at most schools.

Selecting Programs to Send Applications

Once you have an initial list of possibilities, use these criteria to select schools to which you will apply.

-- Admissions data, including the percent of applicants admitted and those applicants' average GRE scores and GPAs. This information is typically available on individual program websites, but is also archived in the APA's annual publication *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2007).

--Program completion rates.

--Financial support offered, including percent of students who are offered tuition waivers and/or assistantship stipends. Note that the extent to which financing is competitive in a program can often breed a competitive peer climate.

--Program ranking from *Princeton Review, U.S. News & World Report, Social Psychology Network,* or other reliable source.

--Accreditation status for clinical, counseling, or other professional practice programs. Many internship and job opportunities might require that applicants possess degrees from accredited programs.

--Expectations for students, including program requirements for teaching and research productivity These activities are often rewarded with assistantship stipends but are usually conducted in addition to course requirements. Teaching and research assistantships typically require students to commit 10-20 hours per week. Given the large time commitment, the

extent of research and/or teaching expectations should be an important consideration in choosing a program that fits with your own training goals. Programs will also report the average number of years per degree and/or the time-to-degree expectation for new students. Many programs also advertise sample (or expected) course sequences and timetables for particular degrees.

--Presence of desirable advisors who share your interests. At least two faculty members should specialize in or teach courses on topics that are central to your interests. Lai and Ellison (2007) presented valuable tips for identifying desirable advisors.

Applying to Programs That Fit

When applying to programs, communicating fit in your letter of intent is very important. Use what you learned in the first round of discovery to present yourself strategically in the letter. Discuss your professional experiences and how the programs' specific strengths will help you to grow. Indicate your interest in working with specific faculty members and how you can contribute to their areas of study. Be sure to avoid the "kisses of death" outlined by Appleby and Appleby (2007). Also, seek letters of recommendation at this time. For tips on getting the most from faculty letters, see Rewey (2000).

Before applying, you might consider emailing current students in the program and scheduling a visit to the campus. During the *visit, ask about specific criteria for that school's* program: peer and advisor climate, stories about past students who have graduated under current faculty, quality of life in the community (e.g., living costs, safe housing), and health insurance. Oudekerk and Bottoms (2007) offered a list of questions that you should ask during a campus visit (as well as helpful interview tips). The information you obtain in this *phase of the graduate school search process* should be valuable in making a final choice about a graduate program if you were to receive multiple offers *of* acceptance.

Conclusion

The process of finding a fit with a graduate program pays off long after admission. It's not all about getting in, but also being happy once you get there and eventually getting a job that you like. If this whole process goes well, you will place yourself in a satisfying environment for your graduate study and hopefully, one that allows you to reach your full potential.

Finding the Right Mentor: Gaining Admission to and Succeeding in Graduate School

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William D. Ellison, Pennsylvania State University

It has become increasingly difficult to obtain admission to doctoral programs in psychology. According to the American Psychological Association's (APA; 1997) book *Getting in: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining* Admission *to Graduate School in Psychology,* approximately 25 applicants vie for every one position open in a psychology doctoral program. As competition increases for these spots, schools arc choosing candidates based on whether their interests "match" those of an existing faculty member. Schools hope to find and train promising applicants as "apprentices" who will work primarily under the guidance of one mentor (Kaplan, 2006). Thus, proving oneself to be well-matched to a current: professor is one of the keys to gaining admission to graduate school in psychology. The APA graduate admissions guide (1997) noted that an applicant's research experiences and his or her tit with a school have become extremely important, regardless of the field of psychology in which the applicant is interested. Application committees will deny admission to even the most stellar student if the applicant's interests are not a good fit for members of the faculty.

Finding the right mentor is not only one of the keys to getting into graduate schools in psychology, but it is also one of the biggest keys to succeeding in graduate school. The right mentor will set you on the path to reaching your career goals, help create a network of colleagues and collaborators that will last you throughout your lifetime, and begin to shape your perspective on the field. More immediately, most students take five or six years to earn a doctoral degree in psychology (APA, 2006), and the quality of your relationship with your mentor will be an important determinant of how successful and productive those years are.

Discovering the right mentor is a multistep process. The steps include determining your own interests, finding professors whose work matches those interests, making initial contact, (hopefully) applying successfully, and making your decision. This article will provide a *few* hints on each step.

Step 1: What are your interests?

Until you determine your own interests, no one will be able to help you explore them. Thus, the first key in finding a great mentor is to learn more about yourself. If you are reading this article, you already know that you are interested in psychology. But how do you narrow down your interests in the field? The best way to begin is to find a lab where you can work as a research assistant. It is best to do this early in your undergraduate career because faculty will often have their students begin with very basic work. Once you have proven that you are committed to the lab and to research, your tasks will grow. Your ultimate goal is to get involved in research in a conceptual way. Make sure you work efficiently, ask pertinent

questions, and do background reading to get acquainted with the lab's research focus and the specific study on which you are working. All the while, you should be asking yourself: What aspects of this research appeal to me? The area of inquiry? A particular dispute that this study might help to resolve? The methods? The population of people you hope to understand? If you can answer these questions, you will be one step closer to figuring out where to apply.

Do not hesitate to work in more than one lab if you can spare the time and if it is possible for you to do so. Besides giving you another chance to answer the previous questions, working in more than one lab is a great way to gain perspective on more than one area of research. Each lab will probably have its own theories, its own methods, and itsown atmosphere. The more you can expose yourself to these differences, the more you will be in a position to choose between different labs at the graduate *level.* You will also be able to use the knowledge you have gained from one lab to impress your colleagues in the other lab. Even if you are not interested in research as a career, the APA guide to psychology graduate school admissions (APA, 1997) notes that "Although practice-oriented programs tend to place less emphasis on research experience, such experience is still highly valued" (p. 74).

While working directly in research is the best strategy for refining your interests, it is certainly possible to narrow your focus in other ways. If you fund yourself fascinated by a particular topic in class, talk to the professor about it and find out what you can do to get involved. This may mean taking a higher-level class, doing extra reading, or finding a research group that is working on the problem. Similarly, if you are dedicated to understanding the psychology of a particular population (e.g., a minority group or people with a certain mental disorder), you can refine your interests by exposing yourself to that population—ideally in a professional psychology setting. Starting to define your interests early not only demonstrates your commitment to the field, but it also allows you to "test the waters" and discover which areas of psychology excite you the most.

Step 2: Who is doing the work that you want to do?

Once you have decided which topics interest you, you can begin to narrow your search for the right mentor. This is done by looking for labs and faculty that are focused on the specific areas in which you are interested. Not every applicant who applies to graduate school will go through the trouble of finding a great mentor match. However, focusing now will decrease time wasted later; it will also ensure that your graduate education is more narrowly focused and that you may hit the ground running as soon as you begin graduate school (Kaplan, 2006). The most convenient way to find a potential mentor is to read as many papers as you can. Whose research catches your fancy? Whose works are cited often, especially by various other authors?

Compared to the last step, in which you struggled to define and refine your own interests, it might seem like a simple matter to identify specialists in the field in which you are interested. I however, it is not always straightforward, and you can save yourself a lot of aggravation if you take the time to get reliable, current information on potential mentors

research. Just because researchers have published extensively in your area of interest, that does not mean they will continue to do so. Their own interests and goals may be shifting, or *they* may be on the tail end of it longstanding grant and about to change course. Irt an^y case, it is often difficult to know from researchers' curriculum vitae (CV) whether you will fit into the future of their research program.

One way to obtain a clearer picture of the field and its future is to attend conferences. The benefits of this are many. First, you will have the opportunity to see firsthand the "state of the art." Poster sessions, lectures, and discussions will expose you to what psychological professionals consider the most important topics of study. Second, you can absorb from others a sense of whose research is considered worthwhile and impressive, which researchers are more personable, and where the tick) as a whole is headed. Finally, talking to potential mentors about their work will allow you to ask them questions about the future of their research programs. Big conferences, such as the APA's annual meeting, are line, but smaller gatherings can often provide better opportunities for learning about specific areas in detail.

Step 3: Are professors willing to train new students?

Now that you have identified people with whom you would like to work, you need to know if these potential mentors are interested in working with you. At the start of the application season, it is a good idea get in touch with the people on your list of potential mentors. Around September or October, compose a short email to potential mentors. Within the email, explain that you are interested in the topics that this person has studied in the past. Ask if the professor is still pursuing this topic and if he or she is accepting students for the upcoming school year. It is also appropriate to attach your CV to the email. Individualize these emails as much as possible, in order to conve^y your serious interest in the topic and give the professor something concrete to which he or she can reply. Remember that professors are very busy and. may not reply to your email. In addition, this is a professor's first impression of you, so keep the tone of your email professional and courteous. it is also helpful to email graduate students. Often, graduate students have more time to email and may be able to offer a more candid view on the laboratory environment and the future directions of research within the lab.

The simple act of emailing professors and graduate students may save you hundreds of dollars and a great deal of time. If a professor is not taking a student, applying to a program will be a fruitless endeavor, because there are no available training slots for the topic in which you are interested. Occasionally, schools will return your money when they discover that you have applied to work with professors who are not taking new students. However, most schools will not. Use the information you have gathered through emailing professors and current students to narrow down your choices; submit an application to the schools that focus on topics in which you are interested and also have professors with whom you would like to work.

Step 4: The Interview Process

If you are lucky enough to receive an interview at a school to which you applied, use this time to impress the admissions committee and to see if the school and your potential mentor are good matches for you. During the interview, make sure to ask about the professor's views on clinical work and research. If you want to focus solely on clinical work, choosing a mentor who expects students to focus solely on research would be a poor fit. Also, do the professor's goals match yours? Does he or she plan to continue to focus on the line of research in which you are interested? What is the professor's mentorship style like? Does the professor prefer a hands-on approach, or does he or she *prefer* that you take the lead and ask for help when you need it?

This is also a wonderful opportunity to get to know graduate students in the lab. What type of work are they conducting? Do they have time to pursue their topics of interest? Do they have opportunities to publish? Do you like spending time with these students? Your mentor and lab-mates will be *your col*leagues for a long tinge. Are these people with whom you would look forward to working?

Step 5: Making your decision

The most difficult and most rewarding part of the admissions process involves making your decision. If you are lucky enough to receive multiple offers from schools, there are many variables to take into account, such as location, hording, and average time to completion. Trust your instincts when making your decision. If you feel that your personality does not match your mentor's personality, you might be right. If so, working with that mentor for five or six years might he extremely difficult. Ultimately, you know yourself best. You are the best person to judge what school and mentor will be right for you.

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Letters of Recommendation

I've heard it's best to get letters from professors/supervisors who know about your research or clinical experiences in psychology specifically. Usually you need to submit 3 letters with each application.

Be sure to contact possible recommenders early to give them enough time to write the letters.

I've included an example cover letter and table of information that I gave to my recommenders. I emailed them about two months before applications were due to ask if they would write my letters, then I followed up with this packet. For the included forms, I filled out each professor's information as much as I could to make it easier for them. They're doing you a favor, so make it as easy as possible for them.

REQUESTING A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

1. Be sure you request letters well in advance of their due date. Provide the letter writer at least one month preparation time.
2. Ask those you approach for a letter if they would like for you to schedule an appointment in order to provide all the necessary information.
3. **Have ready and in your possession** the information a letter writer will need in order to write you an informed letter of recommendation. Organize the following information and include your name, address, phone number, and email address:

   • A description of your professional goals

   • A copy of your resume

   • A copy of your transcript

   • Honor society memberships (e.g. Psi Chi) and any positions held •
   Relevant activities/organization involvement

   • Awards and publications, if applicable

   • Directed research projects in which you have participated

   • Titles and Abstracts of any research papers you have written

   • Service activities, volunteer work, study abroad trips, other relevant
      information

   • Other majors, minors, certificates, and/or "related area"

   • A list of courses taken from the recommender, including the terms of the courses

4. In addition to the personal information listed above, you will also need to prepare and submit the following:

   • Pre-addressed and postage stamped envelopes for each letter your are
      requesting

   • Various applications will also have forms the recommenders are asked to complete,
     make sure to include these when submitting your materials • List the schools you
     are applying to and application deadlines for each

5. Ask the letter writer if you may leave your prepared materials with them *or* if they prefer you bring them with you if/when you next meet.
6. State whether you would like the professor to mail the recommendations, or if you prefer to pick up the recommendation to submit all of your materials at one time.
7. Thank them for their time and consideration of your request and/or recommendation.

EXAMPLE

November 3, 2008

Dear Dr. Pliske,

Thank you for agreeing to be one of my recommenders. I have decided to apply to 14 clinical psychology programs, which is annoying for everyone involved, and I am very grateful for your help.

I have enclosed a spreadsheet which lists the following for each school:

- Due date of application
- Type of recommendation letter specified
- Enclosures, and
- Additional Information

I have also included my C.V. which summarizes all of my relevant experience in psychology. All of the programs to which I am applying are in the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. track, and each of these schools has a strong research emphasis.: I would appreciate if you would highlight my research **experience** and academic performance. [

For the recommendations types 'form' or 'not specified,' please seal your letter in the provided envelope and sign across the sealed flap. I will include the letters in my application packet, so please return the sealed envelopes to me when you have finished, or at least **one week** before the application due date.'; The application for University at Buffalo requires the recommender to mail the letter separately, and I have included a stamped and addressed envelope. If you'd rather not mail it, return it to me and I will take care of it.

If you have any questions or need any more information, just let me know!

Again, thank you! Mary

You're Writing Your Own Letter of Recommendation
John C. Norcross, PhD
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University of Scranton (PA)

The pithy title of this article is our favorite expression to students requesting letters of recommendation from us. No, not in the literal, irritating sense that a few professors ask you, the student, to physically write portions of their letter of recommendation for you. But in the figurative sense that your behavior over the past 3 (or more) years of your academic life largely determines what we will write about you. Your behavior, your performance dictates the tone and content of our letter on your behalf. Think of your professors as mirrors and recorders of your activity.

Research on graduate school admissions and employment selection consistently demonstrates the high importance of letters of recommendation (Briihl & \W'asieleski, 2004; AMunoz-Dunbar & Stanton, 1999). In a recent study of hundreds of graduate programs in psychology (Norcross, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2005), program directors rated letters of recommendation as the *single most important c^{r}iterion* in their admissions decisions. Yet, students routinely underestimate the value that admissions committees accord to letters of recommendation (Nauta, 2000).

Why Letters of Recommendation?

What do employers and admission committees gain from letters of recommendation? Direct evaluation of your work from a professional experienced in the field. Employers and admission committees desire a more objective sense of your abilities and experience than what you can provide. Moreover, letters of recommendation provide evaluations of certain skills and characteristics that grade point averages and Graduate Record Examination scores cannot (Norcross, Sayette, & Mayne, 2008).

Researchers have identified the most frequent applicant characteristics that recommenders were requested to rate (Appleby, Keenan, & Mauer, 1999). The resulting list, based on the analysis of 143 recommendation forms, describes the characteristics that psychology graduate programs value in their applicants. In descending order of frequency, the top dozen are:

- Motivated and hardworking

- High intellectual/scholarly ability

- Research skills

- Emotionally stable and mature

- Writing skills

- Speaking skills

- Teaching skills/potential

- Works well with others

- Creative and original

- Strong knowledge of area of study

- Character or integrity

- Special skills, such as computer or lab

As a student, you must make a concerted effort to acquire relevant skills (research, writing, speaking, computer, etc.), to develop personal relationships with employers and professors, and to be perceived by at least three of them as motivated, bright, emotionally stable, capable of working well with others, and possessing integrity (Appleby et al., 1.999).

Given the huge importance of letters and your ability to direct their content, we hereby offer a half-dozen don'ts and a dozen do's in writing your own letters of recommendation—he it for employment, graduate school, or both.

A Half-Dozen Don'ts

Don't be a refrigerator light bulb.

Sadly, some students only seem to function while under direct supervision (when the refrigerator door is open). Employers and graduate schools are looking for individuals who are capable of autonomous activity—who stay interested and vibrant even when a professor is not in their immediate vicinity. They seek students who can problem solve, yet ask for assistance as needed; students who have both Yin and Yang.

Don't blame your poor performance on other people.

When students begin to whine—"I didn't know that I was supposed to go to Career Services to get help with job hunting" or "How come nobody gave me a research project!?'—professors turn silent and indignant. Is that what you want your letter to say?

Blaming and whining—"No one told me!"--represent the antithesis of responsibility and initiative.

Don't publicly manifest your pitiful skills in time manage-ment.

This past semester a student approached one of us before class and said, "Sorry, but I need to leave class today after I take the quiz, because I reed to study for a big test in another class." The student is rating himself lowly on the recommendation form on "time management" and probably "social judgment."

Don't exhibit any lethal student behaviors.

One creative study asked psychologists how they would handle requests for a letter of recommendation from a student exhibiting specific problems (Grote, Robiner, & Haut, 2001). The majority of psychologists indicated that they would not write a letter for a student who was abusing substances or who had shown unethical behavior. For most of the other student problems—interpersonal problems, lack of motivation, paucity of responsibility, marginal clinical skills—psychologists routinely would tell the student about their reservations, then write the letter including the negative information. Bottom line: Behave in ways that you would like to be communicated in your letter of recommendation.

Don't ask inappropriate folks for letters of recommendation.

Blood relatives and unfamiliar politicians (even if they are your parents' friends) should never write letters of recommendations. A letter from a graduate teaching assistant, according to the research (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000), is essentially of no help. And don't even think of asking your psychotherapist for one!

Choose people with whom you have worked for a long enough period, preferably for a year or more. That typically excludes a professor from whom you have taken a single class, even if you did get an A. If you wrote a particularly strong paper in the class and the professor knows you a bit better, then he or she could serve as a reference, but this reference is still not the most desirable.

Don't assume faculties have to write your letters.

Contrary to popular student belief, professors do not have to write letters of recommendation. Letters are a common and voluntary courtesy, not a job requirement.

Why might faculty members decline to write a letter for a student? The single most common reason is that they don't know the student well enough (Keith-Spiegel, 1991). Other

frequent reasons given by faculty are that they question the student's motivation level, emotional stability, academic credentials, or professional standards. If faculty defer on your request for a letter, politely inquire about their reasoning and graciously thank them for their candor.

A Dozen Do's

Do start early.

Employers typically request two or three letters of recommendation; graduate programs typically request three or four. Those letters need to arrive in a timely fashion before the deadline. That means you must ask for letters 4 to 6 weeks before the deadline.

Play it safe and provide the reference forms at least 6 weeks before the deadline. Completing your recommendation may not be the top priority of the person you have asked to write it, or he or she may be out of town prior to the deadline. Faculty members are people too; some of them even procrastinate and may have pending deadlines of their own. Do not take any chances that a letter will be late.

Do ask the right people.

Patricia Keith-Spiegel and colleagues (2000) asked members of admissions committees to rank sources of recommendation letters. Raters were asked to assume that the letters from these different sources were equally positive so that rating variations were due solely to the referee's characteristics. The most valuable sources of recommendations were in order: (a) A mentor with whom the applicant has done considerable work; (b) the applicant's professor, who is also a well-known and highly respected psychologist; (c) an employer in a job related to the applicant's professional goals; (d) the chair of the academic department in which the applicant is majoring; (e) a professor from another department from whom the applicant has taken a relevant upper-division course. Use these results to inform your choices.

Do tailor the letters to the particular job or graduate program.

Try to secure letters that will give the employer or graduate admissions committee the information they desire. If you are applying for a clinical job or to a practice-oriented graduate program, two letters from clinical supervisors and one from a classroom instructor

might be prudent. By contrast, if you are applying for a research-oriented job or graduate school, then two letters from research mentors would probably be better. If a potential employer desires information on your prior work performance, then a previous employer would be significantly more helpful than that of a professor with whom you are not well acquainted.

Do ask if the person can write you a "good letter of recommendation."

Ask the person writing the letters whether he or she can support your application for employment or graduate school. Ask this direct and specific question: "Can you write a good letter of recommendation for me?" If the person responds hesitantly or with reserve, *ask someone else.* A bad letter of recommendation is deadly. Better to have one brief letter from a professor who knows you less than from someone who might express reservations about your abilities. "I don't know" is better than "I know, but I have reservations."

Do waive your right.

Recommendation forms, by law, will contain a statement asking whether you do or do not waive your right to inspect the completed letter of reference. The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (the so-called Buckley Amendment) mandates that students over age 18 be given access to their school records unless they waive this right. This is a complicated topic, but *we* advise applicants to waive their right of access *providing;* as just discussed, the person writing the letter knows the student well and has unhesitantly agreed to serve as a reference. Do not waive access—or better yet, do not request letters—from persons you do not trust or do not know.

A confidential letter carries more weight. By waiving your right to access, you communicate confidence that the letters will be supportive, and you express trust in your reference. In fact, over 90% of health profession schools prefer letters of recommendation that are waived by the student (Chapman & Lane, 1997: Elam et al., 1998). Our experiences and naturalistic studies (e.g., Ceci & Peters, 1984; Shaffer & Tomarelli, 1981) suggest that professors' honest evaluations will be compromised when you have access to what they have written. By waiving the right, you are communicating intent to have the "truth" told. Otherwise, admissions committees may lump the letter with all the other polite and positive testimonials (Halgin, 1986).

Indeed, we both decline to write letters unless the right to access is waived. We reason that our finely crafted letters will be devalued to the point that our effort isn't worth the

impact. ***Do provide materials to improve the tone and detail or your letter.***

Give your referees sufficient data to render informed and positive letters about your personal characteristics, academic strengths, and interpersonal skills so that they do not resort to filling your recommendations with irrelevant content.

Letters are evaluated for positive tone *and* supportive detail. A two-paragraph laudatory letter on the order of "Great student, fine person" simply doesn't make the detailed case for competitive employment or graduate admission. A "liability letter" is one that communicates limited knowledge of the applicant, leading an employer or admissions committee to conclude that the person was only minimally connected to professors in his or her undergraduate department (Halgin, 1986).

If the person responds affirmatively to your specific request for a "good" recommendation, then provide that person with a letter similar to that shown in Figure 1. The person writing a letter of recommendation needs copious information in order to produce a credible and informative letter. The letter—and the attendant course listing and CV—will promote accuracy and detail. These are essential characteristics of strong letters of recommendation. Again: You can be powerful in shaping a professor's letter of recommendation!

Do all of these steps in person.

Yes, it is interpersonally anxious to ask someone, "Can you write me a good letter of recommendation for me?" And, of course, all of these steps are painstaking and time-consuming. But that is precisely the point: You are demonstrating your interpersonal skills, responsibility, and work ethic to the professor even as you are requesting a letter of recommendation attesting to those very attributes!

Thus, ask in person during a formal meeting—not in an email, not by telephone, not in a few minutes before work or class, not by placing a recommendation form in the person's mailbox. Take the initiative and do it directly in real-time.

Do complete the annoying information on forms accompanying of recommendation.

Many graduate programs and employers generate their own forms for recommendations. These forms request essentially the same information: the length of time the writer has known you and in what capacities; ratings on your writing skills, organizational ability, maturity, interpersonal skills, persistence, research or clinical skills, and similar qualities on a structured grid; and a request for a summary rating. That rating calls for a check mark on a continuum from "not recommended" to "highly recommended" or a numerical value

representing an overall ranking of this student to others taught in the past.

Your dual tasks here are to complete all of the information about yourself and your referee on the forms and to provide stamped, addressed envelopes. This is a small but crucial precaution; do not take the chance that postage will delay return of the letter. It is also courteous: Your professor is doing you a favor taking considerable time and contemplation to write a good letter.

Do prepare for electronic submissions of letters.

We guesstimate that approximately one-third of the recommendation letters we write are now submitted electronically through human resource homepages or admission portals. And that proportion is growing as employers and graduate schools go paper-less. In this case, you list the names, positions, and e-mail addresses of people who have already agreed to write you letters on your application. The employers and graduate schools then directly contact your referees via e-mail and provide them with the URI., and a password to electronically sub snit their letters to your application file. Online submission of recommendations will streamline the entire process and will become the rule in the near future.

Do practice self-empathy.

Some students receive neutral letters of recommendation through no fault of their own. They experience difficulty in securing detailed letters of recommendation because *they:*

> • transferred born one college to another college before graduating (which occurs according to the U.S. Department of Education, to almost one-third of all students);
> • attended a mammoth state university where they took huge lecture classes and never had the salve psychology professor twice; or
> • switched majors relatively late in their college career and did not get to know their psychology professors well.

We express sympathy to these plights and then recommend three vital remedies. **First,** you need to double your efforts to get involved in field experiences, research activities, and departmental matters—and do so quickly. **Second**, practice self-empathy: give yourself a break, realize that the situation is partially to blame, and do the best you can in securing letters of recommendation. **Third**, if applying to competitive graduate programs, then consider applying a year later to increase contact time with faculty and to strengthen your research and practical experience.

Do go online for additional tips.

      More pointers on securing and requesting letters of recommendation are offered by the following Web sites:

- http://gradschool.about.com/od/askingforletters/ht/howletter. htm

- wwwwriteexpress.com/recommendation-letters.html

- www.uwm.edu/People/ccp2/work/recletter.html

- www.psychwww.com/careers/lettrec.htm

- www.boxfreeconcepts.com/reco/

   Do double-check everything. After all of this effort, insure that your letters of recommendation are submitted on time and to the correct school or employer. We endure the annual experience of encountering missed information, unchecked waiver boxes, even forms associated with envelopes heading to the wrong school! Allow 3 weeks after you requested the letters and politely inquire if the letter has been sent. Be politic: do not pester, but do follow up.

In Closing

      Once you accept the core premise that you, figuratively, write your own letter of recommendation, you immediately recognize your power. 7Ou largely control what goes in your letter; you control destiny. Start now writing your own enthusiastic and detailed letter of recommendation.

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EXAMPLE OF A REQUEST FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL ADMISSION

Pat Jones, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology West Coast University
1200 Faculty Building
Everywhere, CA

Dear Dr. Jones:

Thank you for agreeing to write a letter of recommendation on my behalf. I hereby **waive** (or do not waive) my right to inspect the letter of recommendation written for me and sent to the designated schools of my choice. I am applying to (master's, doctoral) programs in (developmental, clinical, etc.) psychology.
My earliest deadline is

Here are the courses I have taken from you.

Fall 2,006   Abnormal Psychology   A
Spring 2007   Clinical Psychology   B+
Fall 2008   Undergraduate Research

Here are other activities in which I have participated.

2007- 2008 Research Assistant
2006 - 2007 Vice President of Psi Chi

My latest GRE scores were 580 Verbal, 590 Quantitative, and
5.0 Analytical Writing. My Psychology Subject Test score was 610.

Finally, I attach a copy of my current vitae and a list of psychology courses for any additional information that might prove useful. Please feel free to call me at 555-1212 or to e-mail me at ChrisSmith@phonyemail.com. Thanks again.

Sincerely yours,

Chris Smith

Applying

Each school is slightly different. Some you apply to both the graduate school and the psychology department separately. Some you mail everything to the department. Some you mail everything to the graduate school. Some you mail nothing at all. They're all pretty much the same yet slightly different. These slight differences may mean the difference between

getting in and never hearing from them.

This is the worst. It's very nitpicky. It's very annoying.

Make a list of the requirements for each program: application deadlines, what needs to be sent where, etc. Then, **double check** all of this before you actually send them out. It is VERY easy to confuse one small thing.

> Personal experience with this: One of my schools never got my application packet because I sent it to the graduate school instead of the department. Consequently, I never heard from them even though I paid my fee, applied online, sent all my scores and transcripts, and contacted my potential mentor about my application.

Be sure to allow for enough time for your GRE scores and transcripts to be sent to the schools. If they are a little late the school will *probably* still consider your application, but why take the chance?

With each application packet I included a list of my enclosed materials (an example list is provided later on in the binder).

Typical parts of the application packet:
- GRE scores and Transcripts — you can include photocopy of your GRE scores and unofficial transcripts in the packet you send. These are in addition to the officials copies which are sent directly from ETS and the registrar
- Letters of Recommendation • C.V.
- Personal Statement
- Writing Sample (usually optional)

EXAMPLE

Mary Petrosko

Enclosed:
- Personal Statement
- C.V.
- Unofficial transcript
- Photocopy of GRE scores
- Writing Sample — "Ginkgo and learning: The effect of EGB 761 on habituation of the tail-elicited siphon withdrawal reflex *in Aplysia californica"*
- Posters presented at 2008 Society for Neuroscience in Washington, DC
    - o Behavioral and physiological effects of ginkgo extract EGb 761 on *Aplysia californica*
    - o Mechanisms of long-term habituation of the *Aplysia* tail-elicited siphon-withdrawal response
- Letters of recommendation: Dr. Robert Calin-Jageman, Dr. Rebecca Pliske, and Dr. Jacqueline Elder

The Curriculum Vita: A Students Guide to Preparation

Introduction

Undergraduate psychology majors with aspirations toward graduate school have a number of preparations to make. It is well known by now that the top factors that influence graduate school admissions are grade point average (GPA), Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, letters of recommendation (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000), research experience, and autobiographical statements (Landrum, Jeglum, & Cashin, 1994). Previous issues of *Eye on Psi Chi* contain valuable guides on many aspects of the graduate school application process (Buskist, 2001; Dirlam, 1998; Lammers, 2000; Terre, 2002), including specific articles on the GRE (Matlin & Kalat, 2001; Norcross, 1997a; Walfish, 2004), writing a personal statement (Bottoms & Nysse, 1999; Osborne, 1996), the importance of transcripts (Appleby, 2003), earning strong letters of recommendation (Arnold & Horrigan, 2003), the odds of graduate admissions (Landrum, 2004), and application fees and deadlines (Norcross, 1997b). Although some guidance does exist on preparation of the curriculum vita (Hayes & Hayes, 1989; Pious, 1998), this article focuses on advice to students in CV preparation and includes a sample student CV.

What is a curriculum vita (CV)? Roughly translated, it means "academic life." A CV chronicles your professional, academic life: it is a comprehensive listing of your accomplishments. The preparation of a CV differs in important ways from the preparation of a resume. For instance, a resume usually provides a brief synopsis of a person's work history and a summary of skills and abilities. Also, a resume is typically limited to one or two pages. A CV can be a longer document without page limitations. The CV tracks your entire professional and academic history, including academic performance, memberships in associations, professional experiences, research interests, presentations and publications, and references. Students and faculty members alike try to "grow" their vita --in other words, the longer the better. However, students need to be careful not to pad their vita with irrelevant materials. Additionally, the vita of a faculty member may not be the best model for students to follow -- more on this later. This article includes a sample template vita that students can follow in the creation of their own CV.

Many of the suggestions in the preparation of a CV follow along the same guidelines for

the preparation of a resume. For instance, your CV should be clear and concise; presented in an inviting and organized format, it must be absolutely perfect regarding spelling, grammar, and punctuation; and it needs to be tailored to the task -- in this case, a graduate school application. Hayes and Hayes (1989) provided valuable advice for students in the preparation of a CV. For instance, they suggested that you create your vita now, even if there is not much on it. When my students do this as a class assignment, it can become a motivator to work hard to fill in the blanks, and eventually grow the CV page by page. Also, you should keep a vita development file which helps to keep track of your accomplishments. By keeping a folder where you store everything, when it is time to revise your CV, all the documentation is in one place.

Revise your vita frequently, perhaps monthly or semi-annually. Personally, when something good happens to me and deserves to be put on my CV, I update my CV that day. It has become a positive reinforcer to me and is tangible evidence of an accomplishment. Finally, have your advisor or mentor review your vita before sending it anywhere, just as you would have others review a resume. This document needs to be as perfect as possible -- it is a representation of you and your skills, abilities, and achievements.

Sections of the CV

1) Contact Information. Display your name at the top of your CV in large letters. Include your current contact information: mailing address, email address, telephone number, and fax number, if applicable. Be sure that your answering machine message is professional sounding, and that your email address is not cutesy (not *flirtygirl@hotmail.com* or *hottiedude@yahoo.com*). Avoid giving a cell phone number as your telephone number. If you get a call from a graduate admissions committee member, you'll want absolute clarity and to be in an environment with minimal distractions.

2) Educational History. Recount your educational history here, starting from the beginning. That is, if you transferred to your current school, list your schools in order starting from the first school attended with dates (if there is a gap in your education, you'll have a chance to explain that in your cover letter). State the degree you have earned (or are about to earn): a bachelor of arts or bachelor of science degree. If you have not yet graduated, make this clear -state that your graduation date is "expected" or "anticipated." Always remember to be fair with the data and don't claim to have a degree that you have not yet earned. Also, state your

cumulative GPA. If your school requests it, you might list your GPA in psychology and your last two years' GPA.

3) Professional Experience. Here, you want to list any academic or employment experiences that are directly related to your graduate school aspirations. If you were a teaching assistant or research assistant, list each of those experiences here. If you had any jobs that are psychology-related, you can list them here. If you are unsure if you should include a particular job, consult with a trusted faculty member. For each experience, list the supervisor, dates of participation, and a brief description of the job duties performed (these brief descriptions do not need to be complete sentences).

4) Presentations and Publications. This is a section where it is particularly important to be fair with the data. If you have only conference presentations, then only use the heading "Presentations." If you have both presentations and publications, list them separately under two categories. A common mistake (one made even by graduate students applying for faculty positions) is to "hide" lack of achievement in one category by grouping both of these categories together. Present your presentations and publications using APA format, except use single-spacing. If a presentation or publication is submitted but not yet accepted, say so. Papers that are "in preparation" or "in progress" need to be clearly labeled as such--resist all effort to pad your CV in any area.

5) Honors, Awards, and Memberships. In this section, list any academic honors and awards you have earned including Dean's List, scholarships, and other awards. Also, if you are a member of Psi Chi, list that here! If you have served in a leadership role for any campus organizations, be sure to list that. If you have joined any regional psychology associations, list your student memberships here.

6) References. Here, you should list at least three references who can speak to your academic skills and abilities. In general, this should be at least two psychology faculty members. You can also include one internship supervisor or one job supervisor (as long as your job is psychology-related). If you are a transfer student, limit yourself to only one reference from your former institution. Make sure you have asked the faculty for permission to list them as a reference, and let them know when your graduate school materials are being sent (more than likely, these are your letters of recommendation writers as well).

Conclusions

It is not necessary to follow this format precisely, but the above sections should act as an overview for what can be included in a student CV. Be sure to consult with your mentor or other trusted faculty members for advice on what to include on your CV, and for formatting tips. Additionally, make sure that multiple people proofread your CV for you; it must be absolutely perfect before being sent anywhere. Fairly or unfairly, your CV is a representation of you. If this document is prepared in a sloppy and unprofessional manner, you will be perceived as sloppy and unprofessional. Figure 1 should be particularly helpful in giving you ideas on how to prepare your own CV. If you create your first draft of your CV and it seems a bit short, don't worry--use that observation as a motivator to get more involved outside the classroom, whether as a teaching or research assistant, Psi Chi, member intern, or by some other means.

The most important thing to remember is to be fair with the data. Don't say that you've done something that you haven't. Don't say that a manuscript is in press when really it is only submitted. Your reputation and integrity are of utmost value and once damaged, they are hard to repair. Following the advice in this article should lead you to the creation of a valuable and important document. If you don't have a CV, start yours now!

A Word About Personal Statements

If you are applying to a research focused school:

Have some specific research interests. Think about the potential area you want to research. Come up with a very general sketch of a possible mechanism you can test, hypothesis you can explore, etc. A couple people I interviewed with said this made my application stick out because it was clear that I was thinking like a researcher. They cared less about whether or not I'm right or how specific my plan was (actually, it's probably best not to get too specific) but cared more about getting an idea of how I think. Specifics can be taught, but orientations and approaches take a bit longer, so let them know you're ready to hit the ground running.

Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process

Drew C. Appleby

Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis

Karen M. Appleby

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A survey *of psychology graduate admissions committee chairs revealed 5 categories of mistakes applicants make that diminish their probability of acceptance. We discuss 3 strategies that* psychology departments *can* use to *decrease* the *likelihood* that students *will commit these mistakes in their graduate school applications and provide suggestions that will help* students *avoid these mistakes.*

> The ideal student, *seen* through the eyes ofgraduate faculty, is gifted and creative, very bright and extremely motivated to learn, perfectly suited to the program, eager to actively pursue the lines of inquiry valued by the faculty, pleasant, responsible, and devoid of serious personal problems.

Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman (2000, p. 32)

This statement indicates that applicants must convey these impressions to graduate school admissions committees throughout the application process to gain acceptance into graduate programs. Numerous authors have offered advice to undergraduate psychology majors about gaining admission to graduate programs during the past decade (Appleby, 2003a; Buskist & Sherburne, 1996; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000; Kinder & Walfish, 2001; Kuther, 2003, 2004; Landrum & Davis, 2003; Lloyd, 2001; Morgan &

Korschgen, 2005; Peterson's, 2001; Sayette, Mayne, & Norcross, 2004; Taylor-Cooke & Appleby, 2002). Despite this wealth of valuable information, few authors advise students about what they should not do when applying to graduate school.. When authors do offer this advice, few support it with data.

We surveyed chairs of graduate school admissions committees in psychology about the characteristics of graduate school candidates that decrease their chances for acceptance (i.e., kisses of death [KODs]). Our data provide faculty who mentor, advise, and teach psychology majors with strategies to enable their students to avoid KODs when they apply to graduate school.

Method

We mailed a letter addressed to the Chair of the Graduate Admissions Committee to each of the 457 psychology graduate programs listed in the American Psychological Association's (2001) *Graduate* Study *in Psychology 2001*. The letter explained the purpose of the study and asked participants to provide "one or two examples of kisses of death you have encountered during your career." We defined KODs in the letter as "aberrant types of information that cause graduate admissions committees to reject otherwise

strong applicants."

Data Analysis

Eighty-eight of the 457 chairs (19%) returned their surveys, and these responses yielded 156 examples of KODs. This relatively low response rate is common in qualitative research that uses open-ended questions because, although this type of question gives respondents freedom to "expand on ideas," it often "requires more time to answer than closed questions" (Thomas & Nelson, 2001, p. 263). We qualitatively analyzed the 156 examples of KODs according to the following procedures (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). First, we independently inductively analyzed each example (McCracken, 1988). This approach required us to consider each response individually and to identify its central theme (poorly written application, harmful letter of recommendation, or lack. of interest in research). Second, we independently grouped these inductive findings into categories, Or "words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected to a specific setting" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56) that described broad situations in which several similar KODs occurred (e.g., we placed an example identified as an inappropriate letter of recommendation author under the major heading for harmful letters of recommendation). Third, we conducted "analyst triangulation" (Patton, 1990, p. 468) by comparing our findings from Step 1 and our categories from Step 2. This procedure yielded a set of themes that were both internally consistent (i.e., all categories contained numerous similar responses) and externally representative of broad examples of KODs (Patton, 1990).

Results

We identified the following five major KOD categories: (a) damaging personal statements, (b) harmful letters of recommendation, (c) lack of program information, (d) poor writing skills, and (e) misfired attempts to impress. We subsequently describe these categories in descending order of frequency accompanied by illuminating examples.

Damaging Personal Statements

The personal statement section of a graduate school application is an opportunity to inform an admissions committee about personal and professional development, academic background and objectives, research and field experiences, and career goals and plans (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). We found 53 responses related to damaging personal statements, which we sorted into four subcategories: personal mental health excessive altruism, excessive self-disclosure, and professional inappropriateness.

Personal Mental Health. The discussion of a personal mental health problem is likely to decrease an applicant's chances of acceptance into a program. Examples of this particular KOD in a personal statement included comments such as "showing evidence of untreated mental illness,""emotional instability," and seeking graduate training "to better understand one's own problems or problems in one's family." More specifically, one respondent stated that a KOD may occur when students highlight how they were drawn to graduate study because of significant personal problems or trauma. Graduate school is an academic 'career path, not a personal treatment or intervention for problems."

Excessive altruism. Several respondents described personal statements that

expressed excessively altruistic professional goals as KODs. Admissions committees are not impressed by statements such as "I want to help all people," "I'm destined to save the world," or "I think I am a strong candidate for your program because people have always come to me with their problems; I am viewed as a warm, empathetic, and caring person." One respondent offered the following advice: "Everybody wants to help people. That:'s assumed. Don't say the reason you want: to go into clinical psychology is to help people." Thus, a personal statement should focus on the student's professional activities such as research interests and pursuits, academic strengths, and professional experiences rather than on purely personal characteristics and motives. It is better to allow letter of recommendation authors to describe strong personal qualities than to include them as self-perceptions in a personal statement.

Excessive *self-disclosure.* Promiscuous self-disclosure characterized another KOD in personal statements. An example of such disclosure was "a long saga about how the student had finished [school] over incredible odds. Much better to have a reference allude to this." However, one committee chair noted that graduate admissions committees do not always view this type of information negatively if an applicant has written **it** in a professional manner that is appropriate for the context of a formal application.

The applicant mentions in the personal statement that he/ she decided to pursue a career in clinical psychology due to personal family experience with psychopathology. 'This isn't always a kiss of death, but a sensitive area such as this should be communicated carefully. If the applicant is "spilling" overly personal information in a written statement, I often view this as a "worry sign" or an indication of poor interpersonal boundaries.

Professionally inappropriate. A final example of *a* KOD that can occur in a personal statement is any professionally inappropriate information that does not match the context of the application. One applicant admitted to feeling "a thrill of excitement every time he/she steps into a morgue." Another wrote "a 10-page narrative of herself as Dorothy on the yellow-brick road to graduate school." A third indicated that he or she "had performed (acted?) in pornographic movies, which was not well received by the admissions department in consideration for acceptance into graduate school." Other types of professionally unsuitable content include using excessive or inappropriate humor, "cutesy/clever stuff," and excessive(religious references (e.g.,' 1 am a gifted therapist naturally. God has given me natural talents that make me a very good clinician. This was recently demonst^rated when 1 helped my devil-worshipping brother go on the right path, God's path."). As one respondent noted, "Being **re**ligious is OK, but it has little relevance to research or psychology graduate school."

Harmful Letters of Recommendation

A total of 45 KOD examples centered on letters of recommendation. The two most harmful aspects of these documents centered on undesirable applicant characteristics and letters from inappropriate sources.

Undesirable applicant characteristics. To excel in graduate school, a student must possess fundamentally positive personal characteristics such as intelligence, motivation, responsibility, and

agreeableness (Keith-Spiegel & Wiedermart, 2000). Therefore, any letter of recommendation suggesting that a student does not possess these qualities can be a KOD. Statements such as "ar^rogant, not a team player, and self-centered"; "unreliable, manipulative, and immature"; "strong will and imposing character"; 'does not like research"; and "scattered and needs some direction" are detrimental to a student's acceptance chances. One respondent noted that a KOD can occur if the letter included "a lack of superlatives. The student has to rise above competency." Finally, a personality characteristic deemed vital for a graduate student was the ability to work independently. For example, a KOD may occur if

> The letter of recommendation somehow suggested that the applicant has trouble working independently and is not clearly intrinsically motivated. Then that person would be at a serious disadvantage. Admissions committees believe that graduate school is a challenging and demanding; experience. Successful applicants must have the motivation to succeed and the perseverance to carry through even when obstacles are encountered.

Inappropriate sources. Applicants should choose their letter of recommendation authors carefully. "Letters of recommendation should be from professors or other individuals who have been involved in the student's education and research activities ... they should NOT be from relatives or employees." Participants suggested that "letters of recommendation from odd sources such as ministers or family friends and letters of recommendation from facult^y members who did not know the applicant well" are KODs. Other inappropriate—and therefore

damaging authors included therapists, travel agents, parents, boyfriends, girlfriends, family friends, and the applicant. Letters of recommendation should come from people who can truthfully describe the applicant's work habits and potential as a graduate student (Buskist & Sherburne, 1996).

Lack of Information About the Program

A total of 22 KOD examples identified applicants' lack of knowledge about the program to which they were applying. These examples included not researching the general focus of the program and not exploring how the applicant's research interests fit the focus of the program.

Program focus. Advisors cannot overemphasize the importance of researching the focus of the programs to which. their students apply. For example, KODs occur when applicants "demonstrate no clue regarding what the foci of the program are" or "haven't bothered to see what kind of work is done in our program." Studying the current research interests of graduate faculty at schools to which they apply is also crucial. One respondent advised, "applicants should do some background reading on the faculty, read their publications, and be able to say how their research interests and career goals fit with Dr. X." Another respondent supported this point with the following statement:

> Students who express an interest in research activity that does not correspond to the research interests of our faculty are not likely to be admitted. This is especially true tithe student appears set on doing research in his or her area of interest.

This idea was further supported by another respondent, who stated that a KOD

occurs when "students note that they wish to work with a specific faculty member who has retired, died, or relocated."

Fit into the program. A crucial aspect of researching a graduate program involves applicants comparison of their research interests with the research activities of a program's faculty. The importance of applicant—program fit is crucial for both the professor and the student to receive maximum professional gains from the relationship (Buskist & Sherburne, 1996). One participant noted

I'm very attentive to whether a student's interest matches our training. I expect a statement of personal interest that displays a convincing, compelling desire for what we have to offer from its start to finish. It's a kiss of death when I read a personal essay that describes an applicant's life-long goal of serving humankind and has a paragraph tacked on to the end that "personalizes" the essay for the particular school to which it was sent.

Another participant noted that students must "do homework on each program. Statements from applicants that state the program is just perfect for them, without evidence they know much about the program other than its specialty name" are KODs.

Poor Writing Skills

Completing an application for graduate school is much like writing a manuscript. The application must include appropriate content, but it must also be cohesive, organized, concise, written skillfully, and proofread thoroughly (Buskist & Sherburne, 1996). A total of 21 KOD examples pertained to poorly written applications, which we divided into two major subcategories: spelling and grammatical errors and poorly written applications.

Spelling and grammatical errors. According to several respondents, spelling and grammatical errors found anywhere in the application are an immediate KOD. Comments such as "writing that abuses the rules of grammar," "misspellings," and "letters that display grammar and punctuation errors" all point to the importance of proofreading materials included in an application packet. Another respondent elaborated on this point by saying, "It is not so much the student's lack of writing ability, but rather the carelessness of sending such sloppy work to an admissions committee that bodes ill."

Poorly written application materials. Poorly written material or material weak in content is another KOD. Students should write their personal statements concisely, but in enough detail to reflect their research, educational, and professional goals clearly. One respondent stated that a KOD occurs when he or she reads "overly long and detailed statements of purpose that are poorly edited." Overall structure is also important because a statement of purpose is a chance to demonstrate strong writing skills, a crucial characteristic of successful graduate students. One respondent succinctly stated that a KOD exists in applications that "lack structure. People who want to get their doctorate should already know how to write."

Misfired Attempts to Impress

The final KOD category included six examples of students' misfired attempts to impress admissions committees. Applicants should assiduously avoid the following failed efforts to make a positive impression on admissions committees.

Admissions committees do not respond

favorably to applicants who attempt to impress them by being critical of their undergraduate programs or offering unsupported praise for the graduate program to which they are applying. For example, one applicant said "My undergraduate program was really bad because of x, y, and z. I didn't really learn anything, so I'm applying to your program so that I will actually learn something." One participant mentioned, "the candidate will give a very had impression if he/she blames others for his/her poor academic record. Example: Faculty here at X university were unwilling to help me succeed in this course." Another respondent cited a similar KOD when he or she suggested that, "statements in the personal statement that are Openly and overly critical of one's undergraduate institution or quality of preparation are [a kiss of death]."

Attempting to impress admissions committees by name dropping influential practitioners of psychology or other well-known public officials may be an unsuccessful strategy to gain admission to graduate school. For example, statements of purpose that "elaborate on [the applicant's] family's work history in the area of psychology or mental health and/or namedrop some recognized practitioner without any substantive evidence of having a real connection" are often a KOD. Another example included obtaining letters of recommendation from political sources who may be influential within government agencies, but who are inappropriate candidates to recommend the applicant for graduate study in psychology. For example, one KOD occurred when

Academic advising is a second strategy that departments can use to help their undergraduates avoid KODs. Ware et al. (1.993) described the role of advisers in preparing their advisees for their post baccalaureate educational aspirations: an applicant included a letter of recommendation from a state senator who was a friend of the family and only knew the applicant as a child and adolescent. The letter said little about the applicant and described the senator's powerful role in overseeing the funding of higher education in the state.

Discussion and Recommendations

Although the KODs identified in this study reflect unwise choices on the part: of applicants, we believe many of these KODs resulted more from a lack of appropriate advising and mentoring than from a lack of applicants' intelligence. Unless undergraduate. psychology programs provide appropriate advising and mentoring opportunities, their majors are likely to commit many of these KODs because of a lack of exposure to information that would otherwise enable them to understand the graduate school culture, the requirements of the graduate school application process, and the exact nature of some of its components. For example, an unmentored psychology major may interpret a personal statement at face value by perceiving it as an opportunity to share personal (i.e., private) information with the members of a graduate admissions committee. Unless applicants know that a personal statement should address issues such as research interests and perceived fit with a program, they may misinterpret its purpose and write personal statements that inadvertently doom their applications. Similarly, an unmentored student may interpret a letter of recommendation as 'a request for information from a person who knows her or him well and can vouch for her or his admirable traits and strong values (e.g., a family member or a member of the clergy).

We believe undergraduate psychology programs can prepare their students to construct successful graduate school applications that do not contain KODs in the following three ways: (a) mentoring, (h) academic advising, and (c) teaching classes designed to prepare students for their lives after undergraduate school. Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000) defined a mentor as "an established professional in the student's general study area who facilitates the student's under-graduate accomplishments and the path to graduate school" (p. 67). Although some departments may have official mentoring programs, most mentoring relationships are likely to develop when students participate in research conducted by faculty. Departments can help their students understand the importance of research participation in the graduate school selection process by sponsoring informal social gatherings for undergraduates to talk with graduate students (Appleby, 2000b). Likewise, departments can promote mentoring by engaging in community-building strategies that encourage closer relationships among students and faculty (Appleby, 2000a). Effective mentoring of undergraduate students can help them attain the research and classroom experiences that facilitate strong letters of recommendation, compelling personal statements, and proficient writing skills. These experiences can help students avoid KODs in their graduate applications.

Advisers may encourage students to seek a match between personal characteristics (e.g., values, interests, skills, etc.) and characteristics of the graduate program. Additional advising tasks include establishing a realistic time line, preparing applications (including a goals statement), taking the Graduate Record Examination (or other standardized test), and selecting faculty to write letters of

recommendation. (p. 58)

This process, known as developmental advising (Crookston, 1.972), reflects the conscious effort of advisors to help advisees understand how their undergraduate program can help them develop into the people they wish to become (Appleby, 2002). Unfortunately, this type of time-consuming, one-on-one advising may not be available to all psychology majors because many departments lack the human resources to provide it.

The third strategy to help students avoid KODs is to provide them with a class that familiarizes them with the nature of graduate education and the graduate application process. Oles and Cooper (1988) described a class titled Professional Seminar that allowed "one faculty member, together with volunteer help, to provide 150 students with 1.3-14 hours of academic advising each semester for a total of 1400 contact hours" (p. 63). Although the primary focus of this class was to familiarize students with their program's faculty, curriculum, and research opportunities, it also included information about graduate school and required its enrollees to write a paper that included "their plans for graduate school" (p. 62). Classes of this nature have increased in the 17 years since Oles and Cooper described their pioneering seminar. Now 34.2 % of psychology departments that answered a survey about this type of class reported offering one (Landrum, Shoemaker, & Davis, 2003).

The purpose of these classes is to provide students with academic and career advising information that may otherwise be unavailable, overlooked, or ignored. When taught well and taken seriously, these classes provide students with the guidance and encouragement they need to identify their career goals and understand how they

can use their undergraduate curricular and extracurricular opportunities to accomplish these goals (Appleby, 2003b). When Landrum et al. (2003) asked departments that offered such a class how important it was for enrollees to gain knowledge about 33 issues typically taught in these classes, the ratings (on a 0 to 3 scale, with 3 being extremely *important)* were 2.50 for "know the information needed to apply to graduate programs," 2.30 for "know how to apply to graduate school," and 2.11 for ``know the value of letters of recommendation" (p. 49). Students who possess this type of knowledge are much less likely to commit KODs than their peers who are unaware of this information.

Not all psychology departments possess the resources to offer their students a full range of mentoring, advising, and academic opportunities designed to prevent them from committing KODs in the graduate school application process. However, we believe that most departments can provide at least a subset of these types of support. To facilitate these ends, we provide a condensed, student-friendly version of the results of our study in Table 1. We encourage faculty to use this as a hangout they can distribute to their students who display an interest in graduate school.

Table 1. How to Avoid the Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process

Personal statements
- Avoid references to your mental health. Such statements could create the impression you may be unable to function as a successful graduate student.
- Avoid making excessively altruistic statements. Graduate faculty could interpret these statements to mean you believe a strong need to help others is more important to your success in graduate school than a desire to perform research and engage in other academic and professional activities.
- Avoid providing excessively self-revealing information. Faculty may interpret such information as a sign you are unaware of the value of interpersonal or professional boundaries in sensitive areas.
- Avoid inappropriate humor, attempts to appear cute or clever, and references to God or religious issues when these issues are unrelated to the program to which you are applying. Admissions committee members may interpret this type of information to mean you lack awareness of the formal nature of the application process or the culture of graduate school.

Letters of recommendation
- Avoid letters of recommendation from people who do not know you well, whose portrayals of your characteristics may not objective (e.g., a relative), or who are unable to base their descriptions in an academic context (e.g., your minister). Letters from these authors can give the impression you are unable or unwilling to solicit letters from individuals whose depictions are accurate, objective, or professionally relevant.

- Avoid letter of recommendation authors who will provide unflattering descriptions of your personal or academic characteristics. These descriptions provide a clear warning that you are not suited for graduate study. Choose your letter of recommendation authors carefully. Do not simply ask potential authors if they are willing to write you a letter of recommendation; ask them if they are able to write you a strong letter of recommendation. This question will allow them to decline your request diplomatically if they believe their letter may be more harmful than helpful.

Lack of information about the program
- Avoid statements that reflect a generic approach to the application process or an unfamiliarity with the program to which you are applying. These statements signal you have not made an honest effort to learn about the program from which you are saying you want to earn your graduate degree.
- Avoid statements that indicate you and the target program are a perfect fit if these statements are not corroborated with specific evidence that supports your assertion (e.g., your research interests are similar to those of the program's faculty). Graduate faculty can interpret a lack of this evidence as a sign that you and the program to which you are applying are not a good match.

Poor writing skills
- Avoid any type of spelling or grammatical errors in your application. These errors are an unmistakable warning of substandard writing skills, a refusal to proofread your work,

or willingness to submit careless written work.

- Avoid writing in an unclear, disorganized, or unconvincing manner that does not provide your readers with a coherent picture of your research, educational, and professional goals. A crucial part of your graduate training will be writing; do not communicate your inability to write to those you hope will be evaluating your writing in the future.

Misfired attempts to impress

- Avoid attempts to impress the members of a graduate admissions committee with information they may interpret as insincere flattery (e.g., referring to the target program in an excessively complimentary manner) or inappropriate (e.g., name dropping or blaming others for poor academic performance). Graduate admissions committees are composed of intelligent people; do not use your application as an opportunity to insult their intelligence.

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Notes

SOME TIPS FOR GETTING INTO GRADUATE SCHOOL:
THE PERSONAL STATEMENT & INTERVIEW
Bette L. Bottoms

1.   WHERE TO APPLY

- What type of program (do NOT apply to research-oriented programs if you do not want to conduct research after you graduate)
    - o Research: Academic setting (incl. teaching), other (business, gov't.)
    - o Applied work (no research): Business or other organization (e.g., school counseling), Private practice (therapy)
- Where (consider going away — increase your options)
- Apply to as many as you can possibly afford (possibility of increasing your offer if more than one accepts you)
- Do not expect to visit until you are accepted

2.   APPLICATION PACKAGE (Different schools/programs/faculty attach different weight to each, but all are crucial.)
- GRE Scores (Goal: 600+ on each component)
- Personal Statement
  Grades (esp. last couple years)
- Letters of recommendation (not from personal acquaintances, see tips on my website for what to give referees)
- Conference papers you might have co-authored

3.   PERSONAL STATEMENT (See Bottoms & Nysse-Karris, 1999)

A.   Basics
- Length: around 2 single-spaced pages (more if you have much research experience)
- Appearance: absolutely no grammatical or typographical errors, no unusual "show off" words
- Tone:
  -- professional, honest, concrete
  -- confident without being pompous
  -- sell yourself without misrepresenting
- Get feedback from professors

B. Key Components

There will be some, but not a lot, of differences depending on whether you are applying to a research-oriented program or not.

- *Research Experience*
  Describe each project in detail. Convince reader that you understood all aspects of the work, not just your duties.

  Circumstances (your advisor, setting: lab class, other credit, volunteer) Most important: theory, methods, results

  Basic skills acquired (computer programming, data entry, subject running, literature search, etc.)

  Products (class paper, conference presentation or publication -- include) How the experience shaped your attitude toward research, interests. Do you want to continue this work?

- *Why you want to go to that particular program: Tailor it.*
  What are your future research interests? With which faculty do you want to work? (2 or 3) Why?

  Do your homework: Read work by faculty. Contact them for preprints, mention what interested you.

  State your specific interests, then express some openness to related topics. Be neither:
  –- too broad ("all research in social psychology") nor
  –- too narrow ("research only on effects of depression on 5- to 6-year-olds' math skills")

- *Other Relevant Experiences* (that make you qualified or that have led you to this field or away from another field)
  Classes (lab classes, etc.)
  Work experience (hotline work, internships, jobs)
  Be careful of including purely personal experiences

- *Career Goals*
  Do you understand various alternatives? Which do you favor and why? Make sure you match goals of the program.

C.   Kisses of death... (See Appleby & Appleby, 2006)
- Poor writing. Overly dramatic or complex writing. Big words (you will probably misuse them).
- E.g., Instead of "I have always been intrigued and fascinated by...", write "I am interested in..."
- Inappropriate self-disclosure of personal information such as religion.
- Cutesy, clownish stuff.
- Your personal philosophy of life
- Your own or friends' personal experiences of mental illness (unless this is really key and you handle it briefly and professionally — even then, it is a risk)
- Poor attempts to explain away bad grades or GRE scores
- Inappropriate self-disclosure
- Excessive altruism. Everybody wants "to help people."
- Inability to prove a match to the program and its faculty.

- Poor attempts to impress (derogating your or other institutions, blaming others for your failures, insincere flattery)
- Stupid statements ("I want to study psychology and law because I love true crime novels." "I want to move to Iowa City because my girlfriend just moved there.")

4. THE INTERVIEW (SEE OUDEKERK & BOTTOMS, 2007 ARTICLE)

A. Before the interview.
- Prepare for surprise phone interview. Do your homework about each program, especially faculty research interests (if a research-oriented program) or therapeutic orientations (if a counseling-oriented program).
- Ask for itinerary for the on-campus visit.
- Write a set of questions/comments for your meeting with each faculty member. Read their articles.

B. During the interview.
- Dress well: appropriately, professionally.
- Relax and be yourself, but your professional self. Showcase your good traits of knowledge, interest, hard work ethic, curiosity, good-naturedness, grace, stamina, common sense and resourcefulness.
- Talk intelligently about research you have done or counseling experiences you have had.
- Never say you are tired and have no more questions to ask.
- Talk to prospective advisor about research you would be involved in.
- Get to know graduate students in the program.
- Ask when you might hear an admissions decision (must be before April 1, unless short-listed).

C. After the interview.
- Send a thank you note, but do not pester for a decision.
- Respond as soon as you know your decision, but no later than April 15.

Applying to Graduate School: Writing a Compelling Personal Statement

by Belle L. Hollorn and Kari L. Nysse - University of Pennsylvania

Your first step toward a graduate degree in psychology is to apply to graduate programs that are right for you. Your goal is to do everything possible to ensure admission to at least one, and hopefully more, programs. The typical psychology graduate school application package includes four crucial elements: Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, official undergraduate transcripts, letters of recommendation, and a personal statement from the applicant. Different schools, programs, and faculty members attach different relative value to each element, but all are important. In general, most programs expect applicants to score highly on each subtest of the GRE, maintain a strong GPA during college course work, submit excellent letters of recommendation, and write an impressive personal statement. Of these four elements, students typically agonize a great deal over the personal statement, perhaps because they have never written one before, because it seems awkward to write about oneself, or because the task is not well defined by graduate programs. In this brief article, we outline basic guidelines for writing a persuasive personal statement. Note that our own expertise is in research-oriented graduate programs; consequently, our advice is largely specific to applications to such programs. Even so, students interested in purely applied programs should also benefit from many of our tips. Finally, keep in mind that there is no one perfect formula for a personal statement. By the very nature of the task, everyone's personal statement will be unique, yet the basic suggestions we provide can be incorporated into any personal statement.

The Basics

Keep four basics in mind as you write your personal statement: length, writing style, tone, and the need for feedback and revision.

Length. In general, a good personal statement will be around two single-spaced pages. In our experience, shorter statements provide too little information; longer statements are redundant and wordy. Longer statements might be fine if you have substantive issues to discuss. For example, if you have a lot of research experience, you may need to exceed two pages to describe your work in sufficient detail. Above all, aim for quality rather than quantity. No reader will appreciate your stretching two pages worth of information into six or seven pages. Remember, readers will be assessing the content of your personal statement as well as your ability to communicate effectively and concisely.

Writing style. Your personal statement is your opportunity to create a good first impression. This means your writing must be clear and correct. No one is impressed by careless grammatical and typographical errors. Failure to attend to such details raises concerns about conscientiousness and reliability. Remember, paying attention to detail and writing well are extremely important research skills. You also should attend carefully to your use of vocabulary. Large doses of unusual or obscure vocabulary will only distract readers and cause them to doubt your writing ability. To learn more about this and other writing errors, buy yourself a copy of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and read every word. This little book is a classic for a very good reason.

Tone. Do not misinterpret the meaning of *personal* in the phrase *personal statement!* This statement is not a place for you to espouse your personal philosophy of life, to describe in detail your first romance, or to tell the story of the time you were bitten by the neighbor's dog and subsequently developed an anxiety disorder. Instead, think of the statement as a *professional statement.* Write about the activities and experiences that led you to apply to graduate school and that have prepared you for its rigors. Provide concrete, detailed examples of your experiences and abilities when possible (see below for more information about content). Above all, write in a professional tone that conveys your self-confidence: You need to showcase your abilities and convince the reader that you are smart and driven to succeed. The personal statement is a chance to sell yourself--now is not the time to be overly humble, hiding your assets. Of course, you should not misrepresent yourself, and you should avoid sounding pompous.

Feedback and revision. After you have drafted your statement, solicit detailed feedback from one or more professors and incorporate their suggestions into subsequent drafts. It is especially useful to obtain feedback from psychology faculty, particularly those who make graduate admissions decisions themselves. Few professors will consider this an imposition--as long as you give them enough time. Start writing early and give your professors at least two weeks to read your statement. Never wait until the eleventh hour to begin writing and then expect your professors to drop everything and read your statement only days before the application deadline! (Follow that advice in approaching faculty for recommendation letters, too.)

Content: The Key Components of a Statement

Now that we have covered the basics of how to write a personal statement, let's focus on what to write. At least four key components should be included: your previous research experience, current research interests, other relevant experience, and career goals. (As you consider our advice, you might find it helpful to keep in mind the characteristics valued by graduate programs as described in an article by Appleby, Keenan, and Mauer in the Spring 1999 issue of *Eye on Psi Chi.)*

Previous research experience. The faculty evaluating your application (often your potential advisors) are particularly interested in your research experience, so describe each project you've worked on in detail. Aim to convince the reader that you understood all aspects of the work, not just your specific duties. For example, do not write "I entered some data for Dr. Raney's political opinion survey." Instead, describe the details of your involvement. Who supervised your work? Did you do the research to fulfill a laboratory class requirement, for other class credit, or as an independent study? Most importantly, explain the theory, methods, and results of the research. Show that you made the effort to understand the scientific goals of the research (e.g., by reading articles related to the research and discussing the work with your research supervisors). Also, note any tangible products that resulted from the project, such as class papers, conference presentations, or publications. If you were an author on a conference presentation or publication, mention that in your statement and include a copy of the publication in your application packet.

By working on research projects, you acquired valuable research skills such as computer programming, data entry, literature review, etc. Discuss all such skills

in a manner that conveys the importance of the skill, no matter how simple it may be. For example, notice the different impression created when you say that you "organized mass mailings, prepared subject materials, and conducted literature searches" rather than "stuffed envelopes, stapled subject packets, and ran library errands." Not only does it sound more impressive, but it implies that you understood the importance of the skill within the overall research enterprise. Finally, state how your research experiences shaped your attitude toward research in general and toward research in a given domain. Explain why your experience did or did not make you want to continue working in that area of psychology (or other discipline).

Current research interests. Describe the topics within psychology that most interest you now. You should have a good idea of this before you apply, because you should pick potential graduate programs based on the fit between your and the faculty's research interests. This doesn't mean you have to know exactly what you want to study. For example, you might be interested in two or three areas of research such as stereotyping, small group dynamics, and self-esteem. That's fine, because all of those topics can be studied within a program of social psychology, and you will find many social psychology programs with faculty who have one, if not two or three, of those interests. In general, it's best to be neither too broad ("all research in social psychology") nor too narrow ("research on the effects of sleep deprivation on 5- to 6-yearolds' math skills") in defining your interests.

Once you have clarified your research interests and identified schools with faculty whose research programs could accommodate those interests, tailor your personal statement so that it will stand out to faculty whose research interests you. To do this intelligently, you need to do your homework. Familiarize yourself with the research conducted by faculty members at the programs you are considering by reading their Web pages (if available), by locating articles they have published, and/or by contacting them and requesting reprints and pre-prints of their papers. (Such pre-application contact sends a positive message to the faculty member about your interest in his or her work.) Then, in your statement, mention what interested you about various professors' work. State your preferred research interests, but express your openness to studying related topics--that is, any topics you honestly would be happy studying. Discussing the research interests of several faculty members will increase your chances of getting accepted at a particular program. For example, let's say you apply to a program that uses a mentorship system (a one-to-one matching of students to faculty advisors). In such a program, faculty will seek students who are truly interested in some aspect of the topics they study. Let's say that in your personal statement, you discuss only your interest in working with Professor Walsh. If Professor Walsh is not accepting students the year you apply, and you didn't mention an interest in any other faculty member's research, you might not be accepted to the program no matter how stellar your qualifications. Now, if you truly wanted to go to that program only if Professor Walsh advised you, then such an outcome is acceptable. If, however, you would have been happy conducting research in another faculty member's laboratory in that program, the rejection would be unfortunate. The rejection might have been avoided had you been more clear in your personal statement about the breadth of your research interests.

Other relevant experience. Potential future advisors will also want to know about

other experiences that make you particularly qualified for graduate work or that explain your decision to pursue a career in psychology. For example, you might want to highlight particular psychology classes you've taken, such as laboratory courses in which you studied scientific writing style, or special topics courses that piqued your interest in certain psychological issues. You may also want to describe work, internship, or volunteer experiences that pulled you toward a particular subfield of psychology (or pushed you away from another subfield or field). For example, you might describe how you struggled to decide whether to pursue clinical or social psychology, and how your experience as an emergency mental health intern helped you decide. As we mentioned earlier, very personal, emotional self-disclosures are nearly always best avoided. There may be exceptions; for example, revelations about friends' or relatives' personal experiences with mental illness might be illustrative concerning your reasons for pursuing a particular interest in clinical psychology, but even then, such topics should be discussed professionally and concisely.

Career goals. The final component is one that is often overlooked--a statement of what you would like to do as a psychologist after graduating from the program. If you have chosen to pursue graduate training, you must have at least a general idea of the type of career you would like to have once you receive your degree. Convince your reader that you understand your options, and explain why you favor a particular career goal. What are your options? If you envision yourself in a research-oriented job, you could work in an academic setting as a professor who conducts research and teaches. Research positions are also available in nonacademic business or government settings. If you are considering more applied work, you might want to work as a consultant in a business organization or you may want to go into private practice as a therapist. (Consult the American Psychological Association for more information on career options in psychology). It is fine to discuss a couple options and to be uncertain about which option you will likely pursue, but in any case, make sure you are up-front about your intentions and that the options you are considering match the goals of the program. For example, you should not apply to research-oriented programs if you do not intend to conduct research after you graduate.

Conclusion

We hope we have dispelled some of the mystery surrounding the personal statement, and that some of our advice will be helpful to you. Just remember: The clearer you are with yourself about your goals and interests, the clearer you will be in writing about them in your personal statement. Be honest, professional, and self-confident. Then rest assured that you represented yourself accurately and fairly, and that, in turn, you have maximized the chances that admissions outcomes will be driven by accurate assessments of your potential fit with the programs to which you apply.

Advice from Dr. Hughes

What to wear (women)

You should look like you belong there, only kicked up just one notch. Repeatedly, and I mean REPEATEDLY, overdressed students get asked weird Q's at interviews like, "would you be wearing this to class every day?" or are you sure you don't want to be a lawyer?"....etc.

What does that mean? No suit. Don't do it. You'll look like a flight attendant. Dress for the weather (warm in CA?) and WEAR PANTS (not need to over sexualize) and CLOSE-TOED FLAT SHOES. I recommend wearing slacks (who even uses the word "slacks" anymore?), trouser socks, feminine flat shoes that you can walk in (no flip flops, gym shoes, or big Doc Martens/combat boots), a light weight SOLID COLOR button shirt, and then a coordinating, but NOT MATCHING all-season blazer. You can have a belt and maybe one piece of jewelry. Carry the equivalent of a laptop bag (no handbag or purse of any kind and not a backpack or briefcase), light makeup, NO PERFUME AT ALL, and that's that. Nothing in your hair, like barrettes or headbands or clips or a ponytail. If you can work a strong solid color into the mix either thru your blazer or shirt, that might be nice---you will then be referred to as "the girl in the pink jacket" or whatever. It's nice, but not required. If you had flaming red hair or white blonde hair or an entirely pierced face, you would not need to draw any additional attention.

[Note from Mary: most people wear black suits to the interview (especially at highly ranked schools). However, when you speak with faculty about this, they usually say that it's an unnecessary and somewhat weird phenomenon that sprung up in the last few years. Wear what you could see yourself wearing the future. Suits can be expensive, and if you're going into psychology, it's likely you will NEVER wear it after the interview. I took Dr. Hughes' advice and I stood out at many of the interviews I attended. Just as long as you look professional and put together, you'll be fine]

What to bring

Bring a few copies of your C.V., a pad of paper, a pen, and maybe even copies of anything you've send the school (personal statement, writing sample, posters, etc.). They should have copies, but just in case, you can whip it out. Plus, you'll feel prepared. Bring a cell phone but TURN IT OFF OR LEAVE IT IN HOTEL.

Regarding Questions

Prepare answers to Qs they will ask you. Like "why do you want to be a psychologist," "why do you want to go to school here," "where do you see yourself in 5 years," "tell me about your strengths/weaknesses", and the ever-popular "tell me about yourself". Seriously, prepare those answers and practice them as you will be asked some variant.

Prepare Qs for the interviewers. Anything will do. Ask about their research or what kinds of internships students end up getting or if there are local jobs or great places to live...ANYTHING. There is nothing worse than someone asking if you have Qs and your saying no.

<p align="center">F</p>

What if you have other offers/interviews?

Be very careful about mentioning other schools BY NAME. You can say you are looking at a dozen schools, throughout the US, but try not to mention any by name. Be confident and you can even say "I've had several schools pursue me relatively aggressively, but I remain extremely interested in what you program has to offer." Of course, if someone asks you outright, say whatever you need to say. You don't want to seem arrogant or withholding. Do NOT say "I prefer not to say."

General Advice

Be warned that you are on interview AT ALL TIMES. If they pair you with a student guide or put you in a room with other applicants or current students, you are being watched and every person you spend even a millisecond with will chime in about you. So no breaking down or gossiping or saying anything like, "Sheeeesh she seems a little mean and wacky! Is that professor always like that?" It WILL get back to the person and it will not be good.

Remember: by the time you interview, you are qualified to go to school there. Now they are simply determining whether or not they like you and whether or not you are interested. So don't worry about saying impressive smarty pants things or reminding them of how great you are. They know that already. Now they are just making sure you don't have any glaring personality issues and they are giving you the opportunity to refine your motivation to go there. For far away schools specifically, you will probably have to play up the SURE I'LL MOVE AWAY I AM READY TO DO THAT and not be all nervous and say things like, "Yeah, after I get my degree I'm sure I'll want to go back to Chicago".....or "I can't imagine not having snow at Christmas" or whatever. No one wants to train someone knowing all the while they will be leaving. Of course it happens all the time, but you can see how it can get sticky.

Interviewing

Phone interview

Sometimes schools do phone interviews. You might not even know they do until you're actually talking with them on the phone (sometimes not even then). Because of this you should prepare for every scheduled conversation with potential mentors as if it might be a phone interview (unless you've been told otherwise).

<u>In-person interviews</u>

Expenses:

> Some schools will pay for flights, gas, food, lodging, etc. MOST will not. This process will be expensive (just like every other step), so plan for it. The good news is that almost everywhere will provide a graduate student host that will save you money on hotels.

Preparing:
- Read some articles by your identified mentor(s)
- Look up general information about anyone else you will be interviewing with (if given an
    interview schedule ahead of time — you'll usually meet with 5-6 people during the day)
    - o You won't be expected to know all about their research if you're not applying to work with them, but it's good to have a general sense of what they do.
- Read up about the program on their website. Programs are NOT all the same, and can differ in some key ways (specialization tracks, required courses, milestones). It's not the
    end of the world if you ask about these during the interview, but you'll look a lot more prepared if you already know something about them beforehand.

General rules while there:
- Be as agreeable as possible.
- Stay at socials and dinners a normal amount of time. You may be super tired, but try to power through and be social. Graduate hosts will understand if you're tired, and as long as you've made a good faith effort to participate, you'll be fine.
- Having a drink or two is pretty typical. Just don't get drunk otherwise you'll become a

story the faculty and grad students joke about with next year's applicants.

- Have some personality when talking with grad students and faculty. Make some jokes. They're looking for someone they wouldn't mind spending a massive amount of time with in the coming five years. Too many applicants I met were so nervous they showed no personality in fear of saying the wrong thing. You don't have to be some gregarious comedian or anything; showing *any* personality (besides trying to be `impressive') is usually enough to set you apart.

After you leave:

Write thank you emails to: everyone you interviewed with, graduate student hosts, and any graduate students and staff that were particularly helpful. Personalize the email by referencing something specific you talked about. The emails reaffirm your interest in the program and keep your name in mind (as well as being common courtesy). Faculty could be making decisions as soon as you leave, so you want to get these sent as early as possible.

Questions to Ask — Clinical, Counseling programs

The purpose of these questions is twofold:
1. The answers to these questions are important for making your decision about which program to attend, and
2. There is nothing worse than someone asking if you have questions and your saying no

If you go on interview or do phone interviews you WILL be asked about 50 times "Do you have any questions for me?" and unless you've already been accepted, you'll want to come up with something (even if you've had all your questions answered 10 times already).

As I learned more about how programs differ, I found myself asking these type of questions over and over to figure out the fit of each program with my goals. Most of these are appropriate to ask a potential adviser or other interviewer, but some are best to ask graduate students. There's another (better) list in *Insider's Guide* (that probably has a lot of overlap with this one), but these are the ones I found most helpful. Please add to the list as you go through the process!

- How many years of training are financially supported by the program (4? 5?)
  - Fellowships, research assistantships, teaching?
    - If applicable, what type of teaching is typically expected? This can vary from grading papers to preparing and giving lectures.
- What is the average completion time including internship?
- Is the program primarily research or clinically oriented?
- Does the clinical/counseling department interface with the other psychology

departments much?

- How much flexibility is there in creating class schedules?
  - How many required classes in program vs. elective/interdisciplinary?
- What type of clinical experience is available?
  - Is there an in-house clinical site? What populations? (primarily students? People from the community?)
  - Faculty supervision or outside supervision?
  - What type/how many different externships are available? How many externships do students typically complete? How long are they?
- What is the timeline of clinical/counseling experience? (Is there any contact in first year? Assessment work first?)
- What is the clinical orientation of the training (CBT, systems, humanistic, etc.)
- Does the school have a mentor model? (students admitted to work with one faculty mentor from the outset)
  - Can students work with more than one faculty mentor? Collaborate with faculty from other departments?
  - Do students ever change mentors? (kind of a touchy question, so be careful about how you word it)
- Is research more biologically-based or more behavioral?
- Does the program offer any dual degrees? (Ph.D/MPH?)

• What is the current research of your identified mentor? (This can really vary from past papers you've read, and it helps to decide if you're still interested in working with them; some expect you to only work on their ideas)
  o What is the research of his/her current graduate students?

• What are the program's milestones? (some typical milestones: first year project, masters, preliminaries, proposal of thesis, thesis)
  o What is the usual timeline?
  o What does the preliminary exam/paper entail? (this answer varies a lot)

• Do students complete their first year project/master's thesis relatively independently or in collaboration with other lab members?
  o Does it involve work on existing data sets or new data collection?

• How well do grad students get along? (a professor told me that the mark of a healthy grad program is that the grad students get along cooperatively and non-competitively) • What type of internships do students usually get?
  o What is the match rate? How often do students get their first choice?

• What type of jobs do graduates typically go on to get? (good to see if the program prepares you for the type of career you want)
  o Research? Clinicians? Teaching?

• How is living in the town/city?
  o Expensive? (a great gauge is to see what graduate students are paying for their apartments — it sounds weirdly intrusive to ask about this, but everyone I've talked with is happy to talk about it. They've been through this themselves. They get that you're making a major life choice and just want to be helpful) o How is public transport?

• Do many students have cars? What is parking like on campus? o Is the city/town remote?

o Does the city have X? (whatever you like about living in Chicago)

Applying to Graduate School. The Interview Process
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The first step in obtaining a graduate degree in psychology is to get into graduate school—no small feat, even for the best students. If you are well qualified and well-matched to a particular, program, you might be invited to visit the campus for an interview. The interview is your golden opportunity to demonstrate your interests and skills and to learn whether it program is right for you. It can make or break your chances of gaining an offer. In this article, we provide a set of guidelines for how to interview successfully and improve your chances of being admitted to a graduate program in psychology.

Before the Interview

Others have written about various aspects of applying to graduate school (e.g., American Psychological_ Association, 1993; Bottoms & Nysse, 1999; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). The importance of applying to multiple programs is worth repeating, because there are many excellent students who want to go to graduate school and only a limited number of seats available. You need to increase your chances of being invited for an interview to at least one program (but hopefully more).

Before being invited for an interview, you might be contacted by phone or e-mail by the faculty member who is most interested in having you attend the program: your potential advisor. This phone call is your first interview, and it should not catch you off guard. You need to cogently summarize your qualifications, why you want to go to graduate school,' and why you are interested in that particular program and that particular faculty member's research. You need to express interest, enthusiasm, confidence, and curiosity about the program and the faculty members in the program. If you cannot talk when the call comes, politely ask to reschedule the call to a better time later that day.

If you pass the phone call test and you are invited for an interview, go (unless you have absolutely no interest in that program and you alread^y have an offer somewhere else). Above all else, prepare well so that you can ask thoughtful, meaningful questions. Read the program's website and any additional information you can get about the program, the university, and its location. Learn everything you can about your potential advisor(s) and other faculty members in the program. Most schools will send an itinerary ahead of time, but if they do not, ask for a list of faculty members with whom you will be meeting. Look up their research interests. Write notes about each faculty member's research and what you find interesting. Refer often to these notes during the interview. Prepare questions to ask each person you meet (see sidebar for examples). Ask your potential advisor to send you recent papers before the interview. Prepare to discuss that research and to demonstrate your ability to generate related questions and future research ideas.

During the Interview

Interviews usually take place over a weekend, and the actual interview day is often Friday or Monday. You will meet with faculty members and graduate students, and you might participate in activities such as a campus tour, graduate student party, dinner, or other events. How should you look? Academics are freewheeling individuals who don't give a rat's behind about fashion, right? Wrong. Dress professionally for your interview. A suit is definitely appropriate or, at the very least, classic pants, shirts, and tops.' No jeans. Also, be mindful of climate. Don't come to Chicago in February without a coat. Finally, cover up: This is a professional interview, not a nightclub.

Now that you're dressed, the interview will not necessarily be easy, but it also shouldn't be too onerous. You need to relax and enjoy yourself while interacting with many talented people, keeping in mind that even if you do not attend this program, you may well come into contact with these people again at future conferences, etc. Although it is important to be yourself, know that faculty will be looking for certain personal characteristics. If you have made it this far, you probably already have these qualities: maturity, interest, diligence, flexibility, curiosity, humor, grace, experience, confidence (without arrogance), and humility. Demonstrate that you are a smart, pleasant person with whom others, especially your potential advisor, will enjoy working closely with for half a decade. Also, exhibit a sense of stamina

and common sense — avoid statements such as "Sorry I'm late, I couldn't figure out how to get here from the airport," or "I'm too tired to ask any more questions:"

When meeting with faculty members, it is important to talk elegantly about research —both the professors' research and yours. Describe your past research and answer basic questions. Don't just passively listen to your interviewer— try to turn the interview into a discussion that showcases your knowledge and curiosity. Talk about the parts of each faculty member's research that arc interesting to you, the implications of the research, and other variables that might be interesting to explore. When meeting with your potential advisor, you should inquire about roles that you could play in his or her current research program. Ask the questions that you prepared ahead of tune, and do not hesitate to ask different people the same questions throughout the interview.

Remember, you need to learn enough about each program during your interview to make the most informed decision possible if you gain acceptance to more than one program. If you are attending many interviews, write down a few sentences about your perceptions of what it would be like to be in each program and to work with each potential advisor. These perceptions in particular will be very important when deciding which university is right for you — your advisor will be the most key person in your graduate school life. You need to work with someone who is a good match with your research interests and your personality.

If you're offered the opportunity to stay with a graduate student or attend a graduate student party or dinner during your interview, take it. This gives you the opportunity to see more specifically what life is like as a graduate student at that university. But remember that your time in those settings is also part of the interview, and whatever you do or say will naturally make it back to other students and faculty in the program.

After the Interview

After your interview, send a thank-you note (e-mail is fine) to those with whom you interviewed, especially your potential advisor(s) and your graduate student host. A follow-up inquiry about when you should expect to hear about the admission decision is acceptable, but don't pester the university or your potential advisor with emails or phone calls regarding the status of your application. Being invited for an interview means you have a very good chance of being accepted to the program, but you might not be, because a program will often invite more students than it can accept. If you are accepted, you will generally receive the formal

offer sometime between the interview date and April 1, and you will have until April 15 to accept or decline. Students who are not offered a position immediately might be put on a waiting list (which might extend past April 1), and as applicants turn down offers, other students might then be offered positions. You only need one acceptance, but it would be very nice to get more than one so that you have a choice, albeit a hard one. Get all the details of each offer. Decide how you will compare the different programs and quickly turn down offers that do not interest you. Faculty members won't be offended if you choose to go somewhere else, but they will be annoyed if you hold on to an offer so long that they miss out on other qualified applicants who are next in line after you.

Conclusion

We hope you find our advice useful. Work hard to prepare for your interviews, then enjoy yourself during the visit. Good luck in your quest to get into graduate school!

Here are some possible questions for you to ask during interviews. Remember to ask questions in a polite manner that suggests that you are expecting to gain information, not in a suspicious manner that suggests that you expect to uncover problems.

Questions for potential advisors and other faculty members:

• What are your current research projects? What stages are these projects in? Do graduate students work on **both your** on-going research as well as their own more independent, but related, projects?
• What facilities outside the department or even outside the university would I have access to? Are there many inter- or intra-departmental research collaborations?
• How would you describe your mentoring style and expectations?
• How often, **in general, do you** meet with your graduate students? How often do the students **who make up** your lab meet as a group? What are these meetings usually like? How many graduate and undergraduate students are in your laboratory?
• Will I have the opportunity to work **on** grant-funded research, or is it not • needed for this project?
• ' **How are most students** fronded? For how much money and for how long? Is summer funding available? What departmental resources are available for graduate student research?
• How long does it take for most PhD students *in this* program to graduate'
  When students graduate, how many publications and conference presentations do they typically have, and what kinds of jobs do they usually get? • Is there any formal training in teaching?

Additional questions if interviewing at a clinical program:
• What is the balance like between clinical work, research, and class work?

• When does clinical training begin (2nd year, 3rd *year, etc.)?* How does the training progress? Is the training program APA accredited?

• How much clinical experience do most students get? Where? With what populations (e.g., children, students, adults, court-ordered participants, etc.)? • Does the clinical program focus on one type of training (cognitive-behavioral, etc.) more than others, and if so, which type?

• What percent of students match with their top choice for internship? **Where do** they match/go?

Other questions for graduate students:

• What **do you consider to** be the best and worst aspects of this program? • What **is one** thing you **wish you** had known or understood better before coming ham?

• How hard do students work? *(Note: you want the answer to he "nearly all the time" if you want a truly top program.)*

• I know most of my time will be spent studying and doing research, but what is the social life like *here?* **Where** do people go on Friday nights?

• How much time does [your potential advisor] spend one-on-one with his/her advisees? What is his/her mentorship style— hands off or hands on? How much feedback does he or she give on written work?

• Do most students get along well with each other and with faculty members? Why or why not? Do students work in more than one lab? *(Be alert to the fact that some disgruntled students are also not doing well academically)*

• Have you had any problem finding funding? How often have you needed to take out student loans? What's the cost of living in this area — how much is rent, typically?

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StudentDoctor.net

This is a site that has a clinical/counseling psychology forum that is wonderful and terrible.

Wonderful: a thread where an anonymous and kind Director of Clinical Training answers applicant questions; general advice for all the questions you can every think of

Terrible: this forum is ridiculously anxious. Some of it's helpful, but some of it will make you worry needlessly about a million things. It can make you start to think there is one right way to apply, and you need to do everything perfectly otherwise you'll never get in. Whatever. Yes, there are some general rules that everyone should follow, but don't get sucked into all the back and forth.

Also, I'd recommend against posting any identifying information, if you post at all. A lot of faculty members know about the site, and it's fairly easy to identify people after interviewing with them (especially when they write about the exact places they've applied, been accepted, been rejected, etc.)

Wonderful and **Terrible:** there are threads that cull together where people have gotten interviews, offers, and rejections. This can be great (oh good, at least no one has gotten an interview at X school), and terrible (looks like I was rejected from X since I haven't heard anything yet). Use at your own risk.

GUIDELINES FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL OFFERS AND ACCEPTANCES

The Counsel of University Directors of Clinical Psychology has established the following guidelines in order to facilitate the Graduate Admissions process.

1. A student can expect to receive offers of admission to programs over a considerable period of time. The timing of offers to students is largely determined by the University's review schedule, which is a strictly internal matter. Regardless of when the offer is made, students are not required to respond to the offer before the decision date of April 15 (or the first Monday after April 15, if April 15 falls on a weekend), except as specified in Section 6 below.

a. Offers are usually made in writing prior to April 1st. Between April 1st and the decision date, universities may choose to facilitate the process by making new offers to students over the phone when a position opens up. These verbal offers are official, but should be followed up by a written confirmation within 48 hours.

b. Offers, once made, cannot be withdrawn by the university until after the decision date and then can be withdrawn only if the student fails to respond to the offer by the decision date.

c. A program may make an offer after the April 1 5th decision date if it still has one or more open slots. Offers made after the decision date should clearly state how long the student has to decide on the offer. The student should be given sufficient time (at least a week) to visit a program before making a decision.

2. Offers with funding are treated like any other offer. There should be no stipulation by the University that the offer carries funding only if the student accepts by a specific date that precedes the decision date described above.

3. The Director of Clinical Training or the designated person in charge of graduate admissions should make every effort to inform students on the alternate list of their status as soon as possible.

a.   The procedure of designating all students who have not been offered immediate admission as alternates is inappropriate. The University Training Program should have a procedure for identifying those students who clearly will not be offered admissions.

b.   A reasonable designation of the student's position on the alternate list is encouraged.

c.   Once the class has been filled, student on the alternate list should be informed that they are no longer under consideration for admission. Students who were designated "high on the alternate list" should be informed by phone.

4. A student should not hold more offers than they are seriously considering. Holding multiple offers ties up slots, preventing programs from making offers to other students. This is a complex principle operationalized in the points below.

   a. It is legitimate for students to want to visit a program, if they have not done so already, before making decisions among top offers. Such visits should be scheduled as soon as practical after the offer of admission is received. If after a visit to a program the student decides that the program is rated lower than a program that the student has already been offered admission to, the student should inform the lower ranked program that they will be declining their offer.

b.   Whenever possible, the student applicant should inform training programs by phone of a decision, following up within 24 hours with a written confirmation of that decision.

c.   Once a student has accepted an offer of admission to a Graduate Training Program, the student should inform all programs in which they are currently under consideration that they are either declining outstanding offers of admission or no longer wish to be considered for admission. Students should contact by phone those programs that have offered admission or have the student high on the alternate list. These phone calls should be followed up within 24 hours by a written confirmation. For programs for which the student is on the alternate list but not high on the alternate list, a letter withdrawing their application mailed within 48 hours is sufficient notification.

5.   It is the responsibility of the Director of Clinical training or the designated person in

charge of graduate admissions to keep students informed of changes in their status. Ideally, the student should be informed immediately by phone and with a follow-up letter. Offers of admission or offers of funding for students already offered admission should be made over the phone with a follow-up letter mailed within 24 hours.

6.   The current policy statement of the Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology allows students to resign offers they previously accepted up to the April 1 5th decision date by submitting the resignation in writing. The purpose of this policy is to avoid pressure on students to accept offers before they have heard from other schools. Although withdrawing an acceptance is legitimate, it is not good form. A much better approach is to accept a position only if you intend to follow through on your commitment. Students have the right to hold offers as described above if a preferable offer is still possible.

a.   As stated in 6(c), once a student has accepted an offer, the student should notify other Universities immediately that he or she has accepted another offer.

b.   Except in *very* unusual situations (e.g., serious illness or major personal problems), a student who accepts an offer of admission is expected to start the graduate program the following fall unless other arrangements have been made with the Director of Clinical Training. Training lines are severely limited and failing to use one after it has been offered prevents other qualified students from obtaining training.

Making the Transition from Undergraduate to Graduate Student: Insights from Successful Graduate Students

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to leave the safety and comfort of your undergraduate institution and begin graduate school? Have you ever wondered just how difficult that first year in graduate school might be?

If you've considered these questions, you are probabl[y] well aware that there are numerous "advice" books and essays published that will help you prepare for graduate study in psychology (e.g., Buskist, 2001; Buskist & Burke, 2007; Kuther, 2003; Kuther & Morgan, 2004). This literature represents the accumulated wisdom of faculty who are deeply interested in helping qualified students successfully navigate the admissions process and become competent graduate students. Nonetheless, for many faculty members the fond experience of the undergraduate to graduate school transition may be a distant, foggy memory. For this reason, graduate students are apt to provide a more accurate and current perspective on making this transition successfully.

To learn more about the graduate perspective, we surveyed all of the psychology doctoral students at Auburn University regarding their undergraduate to graduate student transition experience. We received feedback from 31 students in their first year and beyond of graduate school. The respondents represented Auburn's three graduate programs: clinical, experimental, and industrial/organizational psychology. These students provided insight into their preconceptions of graduate school and how their preconceptions changed during their first year. They also offered ample advice for achieving success during the first year of graduate school.

Preconceptions of Graduate Life

As undergraduates, they had mixed feelings toward graduate school. Some respondents believed that graduate school would simply be an extension of their undergraduate education, that most undergraduates go to graduate school, and that those who do well as undergraduates would perform equally well as graduate students. Others were less optimistic. These respondents assumed that graduate school was only for the best undergraduate students. They also predicted that graduate school would be more difficult, would demand more time, and required higher standards and more hands-on experience than

undergraduate education. 'These respondents had particular reservations regarding [he amount of reading, writing, and memorization required for surviving in such a rigorous intellectual environment.

The most common preconceptions were that graduate students are smart, hardworking, and dedicated to learning. After all, they voluntarily spend four or more years in school beyond their bachelor's degree. For a substantial portion of this time, graduate students are constantly busy, stressed, and caffeine-infused. How else could they complete their infinite string of assignments? These preconceived notions left our sample with the overall impression that graduate school does not permit a social life of any kind. Indeed, nearly all respondents perceived graduate school as a hall-time job.

Surprises

After beginning their graduate careers, our respondents discovered that only some of their preconceptions were accurate and others were not. Much to their surprise, respondents discovered it was possible to have a social life in graduate school. Nonetheless, out-of-school activities for graduates differed from those of t^{y}pical undergraduates. As one respondent commented: "There is still some time to do hin things on weekends, but this time comes at a price—consistently doing fun activities every weekend means that you are behind in some other area (e.g., class work, research, or thesis)."

Another unanticipated aspect of graduate school is the lack of emphasis placed on class work. "Courses are a side-bar and in some cases almost an afterthought;' one graduate student noted. Unbeknownst to many undergraduate students, completing research, not coursework, becomes the driving force behind success in graduate school. Depending on one's research area, this news could become discouraging as 4 to 5 years in graduate school can quickly become 5 to 7 years (and for some graduate students, even longer).

Another graduate student noted, "Most of what you learn will conic through experience and self-guided inquiry' In other words, how you develop as a young professional about to enter the field is truly *your* responsibility.

Graduate students in our sample were largely unaware of the highly autonomous nature of graduate life before they entered graduate school. They did not anticipate that professors who served as their major advisors would refuse to hold their hands. In graduate school, students must learn to use their professors as resources. With time, many graduate students became colleagues with faculty and developed close working relationships with

them. They became genuine collaborators in research, teaching, and professional development. For others, establishing a working relationship with a faculty member remained a challenge to overcome. Either way, the data suggest that if graduate students want a professor's guidance, they must seek it themselves.

Somewhat unexpectedly, graduate students also varied in terms of work ethic. Some students still procrastinated, partied, and crammed for exams. I-Iowever, respondents reported that such habits often took a toll by affecting their ability to complete coursework, earn good grades, and maintain a productive research program. In many graduate programs (such as Auburn's) a "C" is a failing grade and a "B" is not much better! Thus, although some students may adopt a work-hard/play-hard approach to graduate school, it is important that they know the potential consequences of their actions.

Interestingly, our sample of graduate students found that they did not have to be the best undergraduate students or the smartest in their class to succeed in graduate school, but they did have to embrace the path they chose. They had to learn to work harder and longer than they ever had during their undergraduate days. Thus, *graduate school is a lifestyle—a* sentiment that all of our respondents uniformly expressed.

Our graduate students also agreed that "there are many hats to wear in graduate school." They are students, researchers, teachers, and colleagues inhabiting a tightly knit academic environment. As the first year of graduate school progressed, graduate students learned to define themselᵛes using multiple terms. For example, manʸ graduate students became teaching assistants during their first year of graduate school. These students were transformed instantly by this experience—although they had recently been undergraduates sitting in a classroom, now they were "teachers" standing on the other side of the podium leading discussion, preparing students for examinations, and offering advice to undergraduates on how they, too, can prepare for graduate study in psychology.

One survey response in particular summarized this shared sentiment among our sample: "Graduate school isn't hard, it's hard work. There is not a day that passes by that I think I am faced with a task I don't know how to do, but there are days when I wonder how I will get it all done."

For our respondents, the most difficult aspects of becoming a graduate student included the increased need for time-management skills, the ability to balance a variety of academic responsibilities, and the courage to do so alone. For most new graduate students, the

multiple demands placed on them required an entirely new approach to education. There are few preset timelines in graduate school. You must manage your own priorities, but there always seems to be other people (e.g., professors, students, peers) who need your time or want you to become involved in their projects. New graduate students often struggle to escape from the stereotypic undergraduate mentality of approaching college casually. As graduate students, they now have to attend class; they *have* to read; they *have* study; they *have* to conduct research; and they *have* to write original papers (and lots of them)! However, no one is looking over their shoulders or holding a gun to their heads to force them to get the work done. They must go it alone. As one student explained, "No one is going to get you out of here. You have to do it yourself."

One of the most pleasant aspects of making the transition from undergraduate to graduate student is getting to know your new peers. Graduate students in our sample enjoyed the opportunity to meet other graduate students and faculty with whom they shared similar interests. As one of our graduate students noted, "In graduate school, everything becomes about psychology. Breadth of study is now defined within psychology instead of outside of it." Outside of class, graduate students actually talk shop without feeling nerdy. Everyone with whom they interacted shared the same love for the field.

Our graduate students were also pleasantly surprised by the rapport they experienced with their professors, the luxury of working in their own laboratories, and working on articles that might one day be published. They also enjoyed attending professional conferences and getting to meet some of the people who have made major contributions to psychology in the past several decades.

Advice on Preparing for Graduate School

If you are curious about graduate school, you need to know the truth about graduate life. For instance, you should know that there are multiple hurdles required to complete a graduate program, including coursework, a thesis, a dissertation, and sometimes qualifying exams, major area papers, grants, and internships. Success as a graduate student requires increased self-discipline. Most importantly, it requires a Herculean time commitment.

Of course, you must first get into a graduate program before you ever encounter the complexities of graduate school. Here are some wise words of advice from our graduate students when applying to graduate school.

- Make absolutely certain that a PhD is required for the career you seek. Know, however, that having a *need* for graduate school is insufficient to make it through graduate school—you must *want* to be there as well.

- If graduate school is the path for you, make sure you start the application process early. Be aware that this process takes a lot of time and money. You should begin preparing at least a year *before* your first application deadline.

- Get help from your professors and graduate students when writing your cover letter, your academic vita, and the rest of your application materials. If you don't know any professors or graduate students, you should! Try to get involved in the ongoing research at your institution. By becoming a research assistant, you will not only expand your knowledge of psychology, but you may also obtain meaningful letters of recommendation.

- Carefully research the graduate programs to which you may apply. Target and apply to multiple programs. If possible, select schools that have several professors with whom you would like to work. This way, if something does riot work out with your initial choice for an advisor, you can just switch mentors rather than change schools.

- Finally, search for "fit." Contact (e.g., call, e-mail, or visit) graduate students currently enrolled at schools in which you are interested to find out if their work environments sound like places in which you would feel comfortable showing up to every day (e.g., level of competitiveness, social environment, research expectation, etc.). You will be spending a lot of tune on campus and in collaboration with others, so make sure you are joining a group to which you *feel* you will belong. If you don't fit in, your graduate school experience will be more difficult.

Final Thoughts

Transitioning from an undergraduate to a graduate student can be a difficult, but truly rewarding process. According to one graduate student, it is a "transformative experience." In all likelihood, graduate school should change you: You should not only become smarter, but you should also develop a greater appreciation for the amount of commitment and hard work required to accomplish worthwhile goals.

Graduate school prepares you to be a professional in the field. "As an undergraduate, you learn a lot of 'facts' about psychology. Graduate school pulls the curtain back and tells you about the science of psychology." Although there is a lot of reading in graduate school, there

is also increased opportunity to practice your learning. For this reason, you actually *have* to remember what you study. You should he prepared to make a life-changing commitment and expect each and every day to be challenging. However, you will likely experience great pride in each obstacle you overcome. Thus, in and of itself, graduate education is rewarding. You should approach the process as the first major step towards your professional career as a psychologist. As one respondent aptly noted, "It's for real now."

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